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VOLUME 9, 2006
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Display Until October 31

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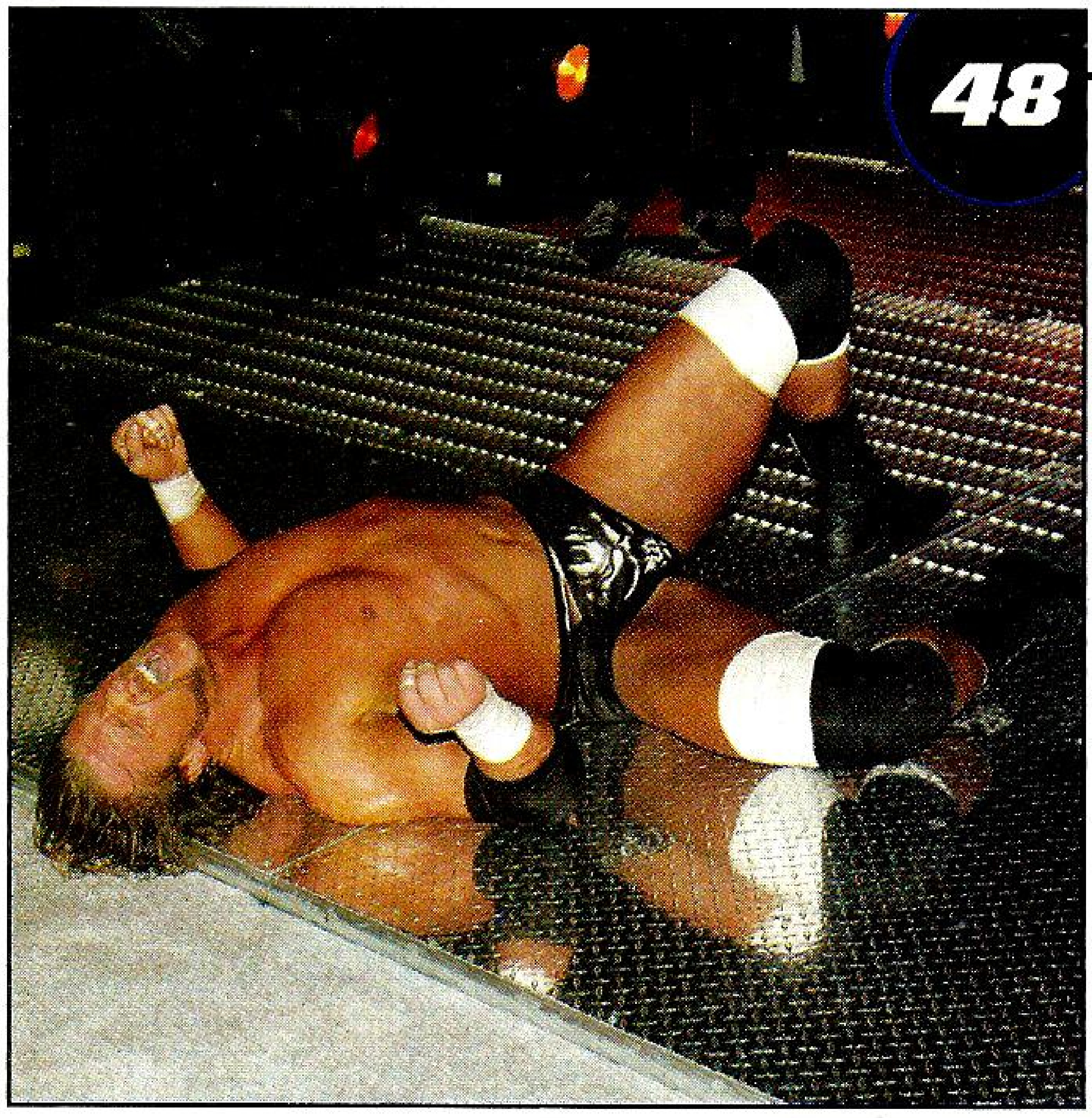
Volume 9, 2006



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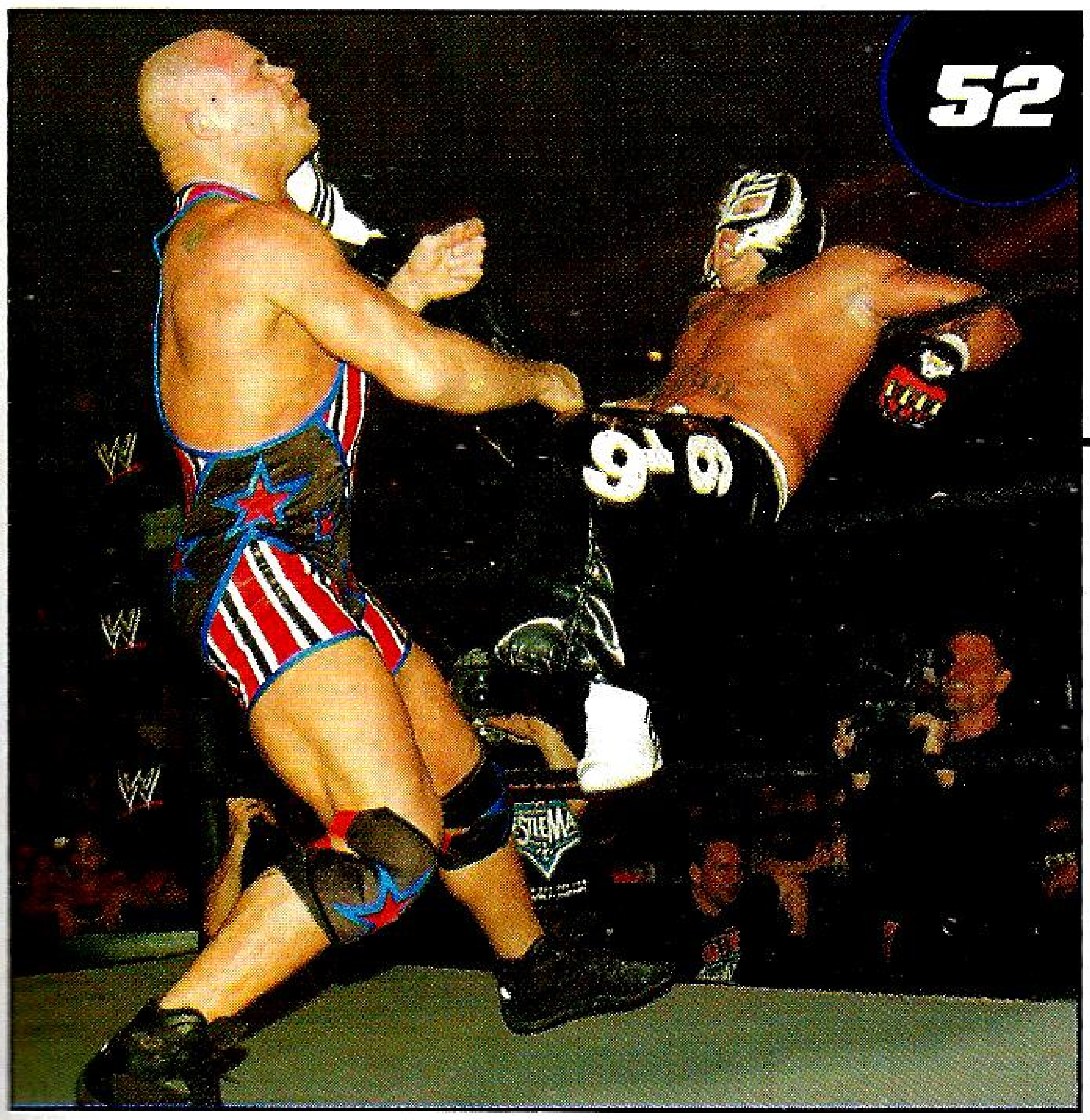

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COVER DESIGN:
Greg Stevens

Look for the Volume 10, 2006 issue of THE WRESTLER/INSIDE WRESTLING SPECIAL on sale September 12, 2006

your letters

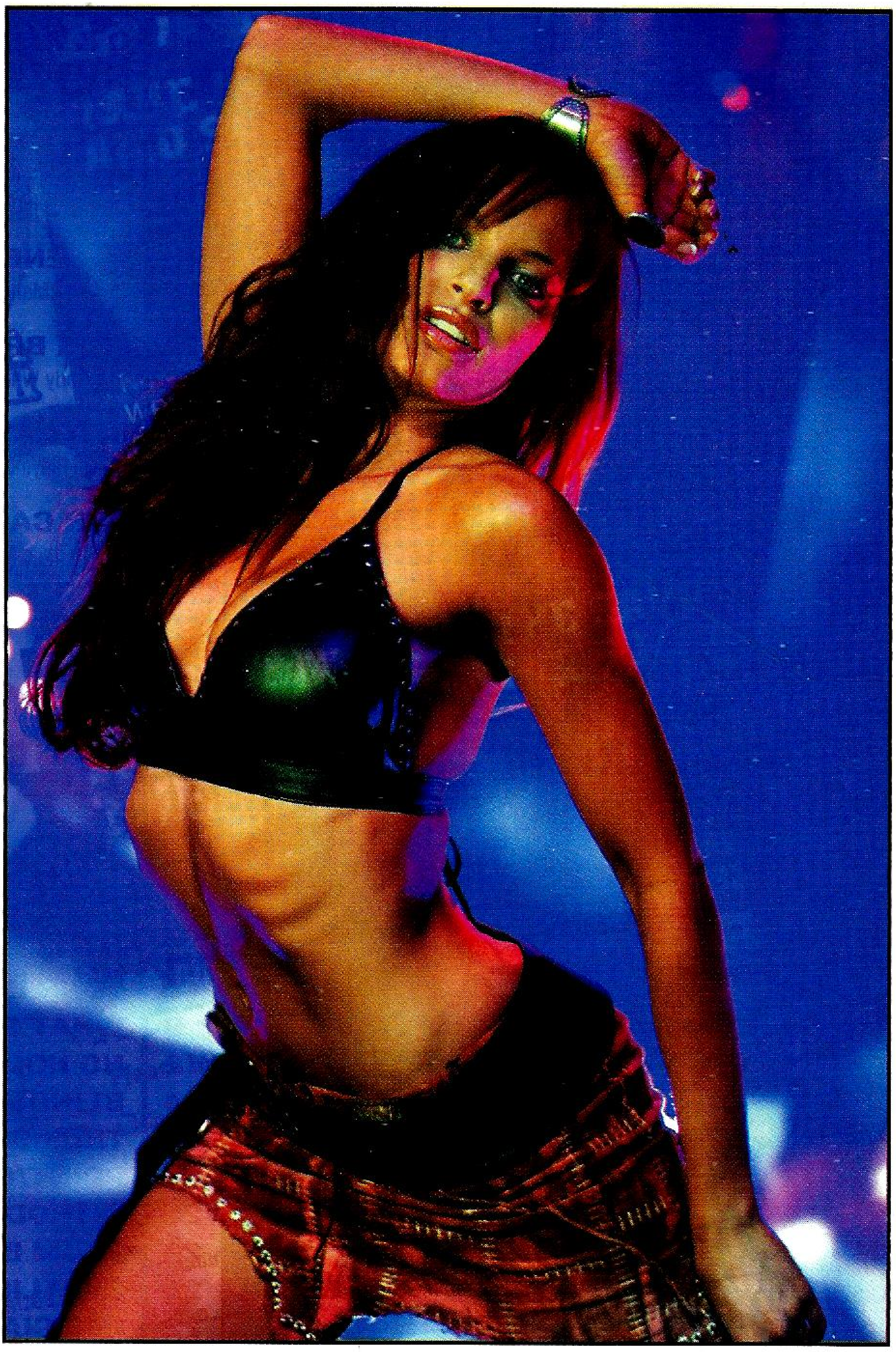
HEMME POWER

What was WWE thinking when it fired Christy Hemme a few months ago? She is the hottest and best Diva in all of wrestling! TNA was so smart to hire Christy and bring her in to work with the "management" on *Impact*.

What does WWE have left? Sure, there are plenty of Divas left up at WWE, but none of them equal the beauty or talent of Christy. Trish Stratus, Victoria, Mickie James, and Beth Phoenix are better wrestlers, for sure; and Maria, Candice, Melina, and Jillian are all nice to look at. But, Christy blends her wrestling ability with her beauty.

I will be watching TNA religiously from now on, if only to see Christy!

GLENN PARKINSON
Columbia, MD



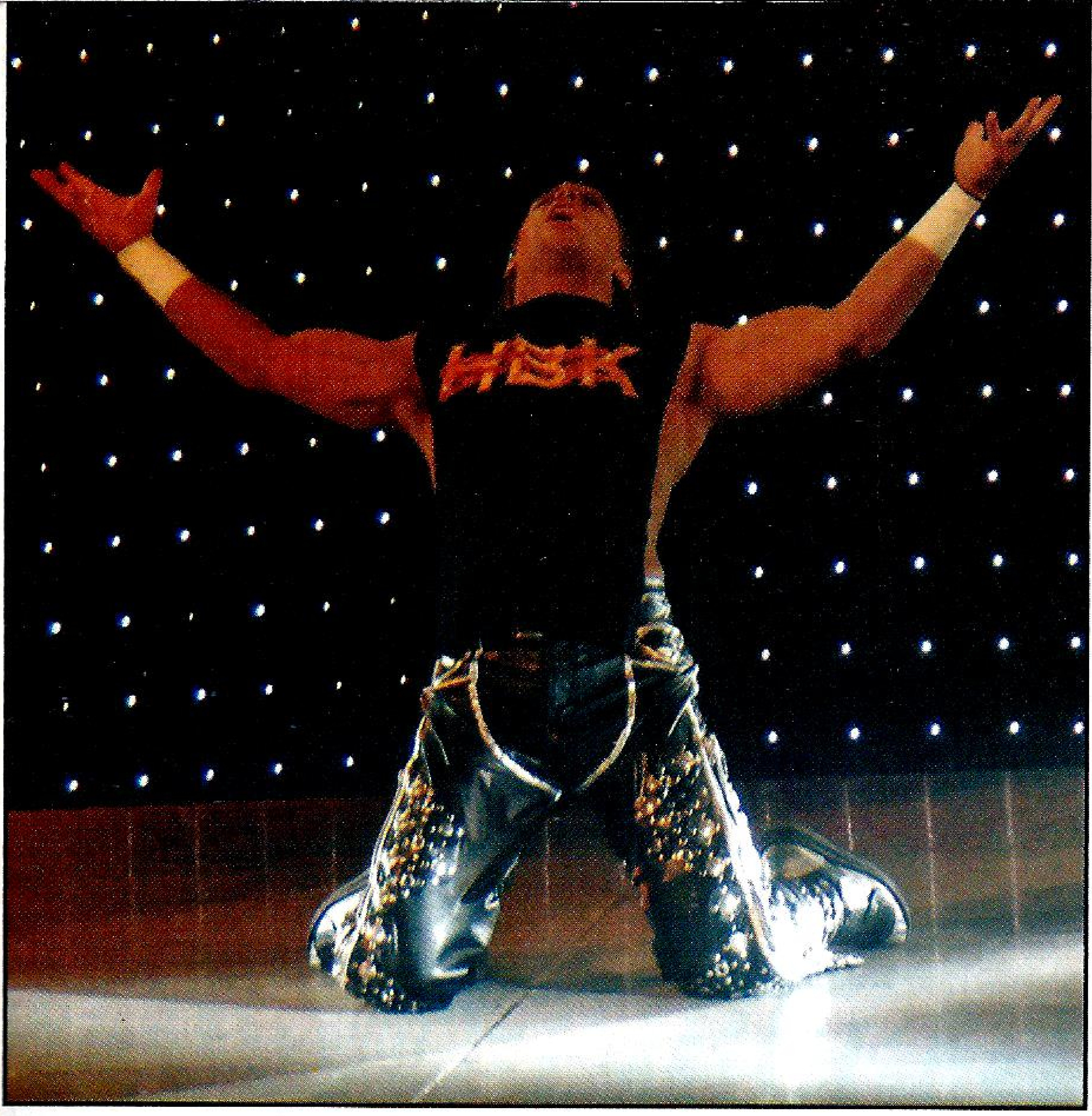
The lovely Christy Hemme has made quite an "impact" on TNA and fans alike. Reader Glenn Parkinson feels that although her role thus far has been limited, Hemme brings more to TNA than most of her counterparts do for WWE.

McMAHONISM GOES TOO FAR

I am a lifelong wrestling fan. I began watching Southern Championship Wrestling (now Memphis Wrestling) as a child in the late-'70s. I first saw WWF in the mid-'80s, but back then, you could only see it if you lived in certain regions or had cable. I enjoyed seeing the likes of Hulk Hogan, The Iron Sheik, Andre the Giant, Roddy Piper, and others back in the day, as well as more recent stars such as The Rock, Bret Hart, and Shawn Michaels.

I have loved wrestling my whole life, even so much that I have been willing to put up with Vince McMahon's "sports entertainment," which has featured incidents such as people getting "slopped," characters like Doink the Clown, and even seeing The Big Bossman dragging the coffin of The Big Show's "dead father" around on the back of a car. I did this because I still enjoyed seeing the wrestlers perform, and the quality of the programs was still more good than bad.

Recently, however, I endured Mr. McMahon mocking God by going into a church and basically making fun of religion and proclaiming the Lord as Shawn Michaels' tag team partner,



WWE thrives on controversy, but the recent angle involving the McMahons, Shawn Michaels, and "God" has touched a nerve with fans who had been willing to put up with a lot. Reader Doug McCaslin is now exclusively a TNA fan.

even starting a new "religion" called "McMahonism." This was the last straw for me. As a devout Christian, I cannot support Mr. McMahon or WWE anymore. Joey Styles was right when he "quit" WWE for these reasons. However, he was only "quitting" to return to ECW, which is run by—guess who—Mr. McMahon! Even though he made very good points during his rant on *Raw*, I believe it is hypocritical because it was part of the storyline.

I am disappointed that some of the WWE superstars didn't oppose the actions by the WWE chairman. In particular, I am very disappointed in Jerry "The King" Lawler, as he was my favorite wrestler growing up. I can no longer be his fan. I thought it was great when Shawn Michaels basically proclaimed his Christianity on TV, but I will be highly disappointed if he remains with WWE after Mr. McMahon's recent actions. Will Shawn or any other Christian in WWE please take a stand so these types of actions don't happen again!

I will always remain a wrestling fan, but I will now be a fan only of TNA.

DOUG McCASLIN
Lexington, TN

FEELING LIKE AN OUTSIDER

Kevin Nash is the worst wrestler in TNA, and I don't care what anyone says! He is old, boring, and a coward for not picking on wrestlers his own size. How do you think Nash would do against a man like Samoa Joe? What about his old friends "Big Poppa Pump" Scott Steiner, Jeff Jarrett, or Sting? Could Nash even last five minutes in the ring with any of those wrestlers, who actually take care of their bodies and still perform at a high level even today? No!

I never thought I would say it, but I would prefer Scott Hall to return to wrestling! Nash should leave wrestling to the wrestlers, and just go off and retire.

DAN TYLER
Colorado Springs, CO

(Continued on page 69)

the Wrestler

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Founder
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The Wrestler/Inside Wrestling (ISSN: 1052-0899), Vol. 9, 2006, is published eight times a year, including four double issues, by London Publishing Co., 6198 Butler Pike, Suite 200, Blue Bell, PA 19422. Periodicals postage paid at Blue Bell, PA 19422, and additional post offices. Postmaster: Send change of address notices to: The Wrestler, P.O. Box 2029, Dept. 9, Marion, OH 43306-8129. Single copy price $9.95 ($11.75 in Canada, £5.75 in U.K.). Annual subscription price $71.60 in the U.S., $85.00 in Canada and other countries. Not responsible for the loss or nonreturn of unsolicited articles or photographs, which will not be returned unless accompanied by a self-addressed envelope bearing the proper amount of postage.
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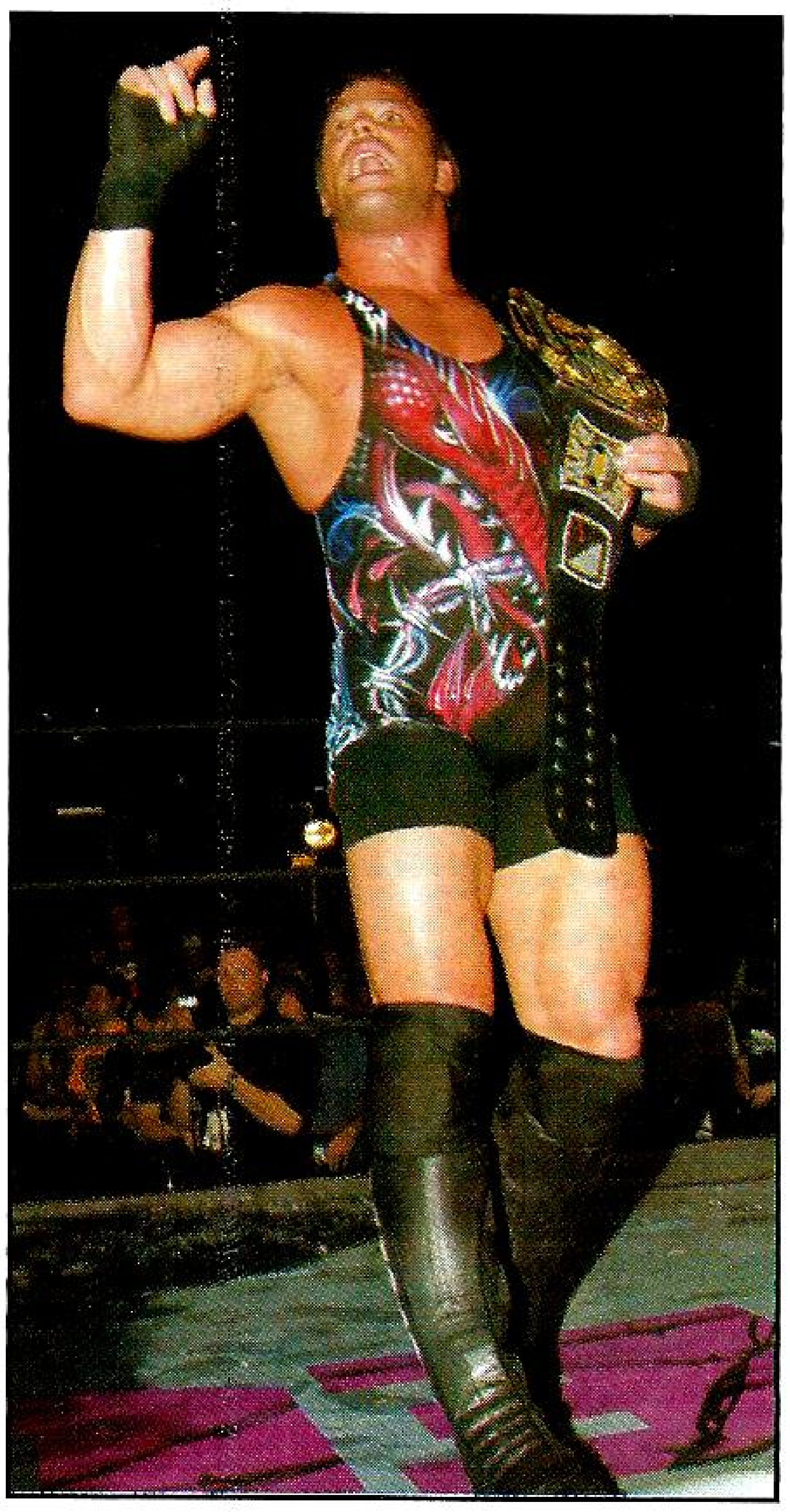
Printed in U.S.A.

what's happening?

By Dan Murphy



Rob Van Dam's thrilling Raw World title victory highlighted a successful second installment of ECW One Night Stand. Naturally, controversy followed as Edge and Paul Heyman factored into the victory, in classic ECW fashion.

EXTREME CHAMPIONSHIP Wrestling returned in a big way at One Night Stand on June 11 as **Rob Van Dam** was crowned the new Raw World champion, and was subsequently handed the ECW title belt by **Paul Heyman** during the initial ECW broadcast on the Sci-Fi Channel four nights later. At press time, it was unclear what the fate of the Raw title would be.

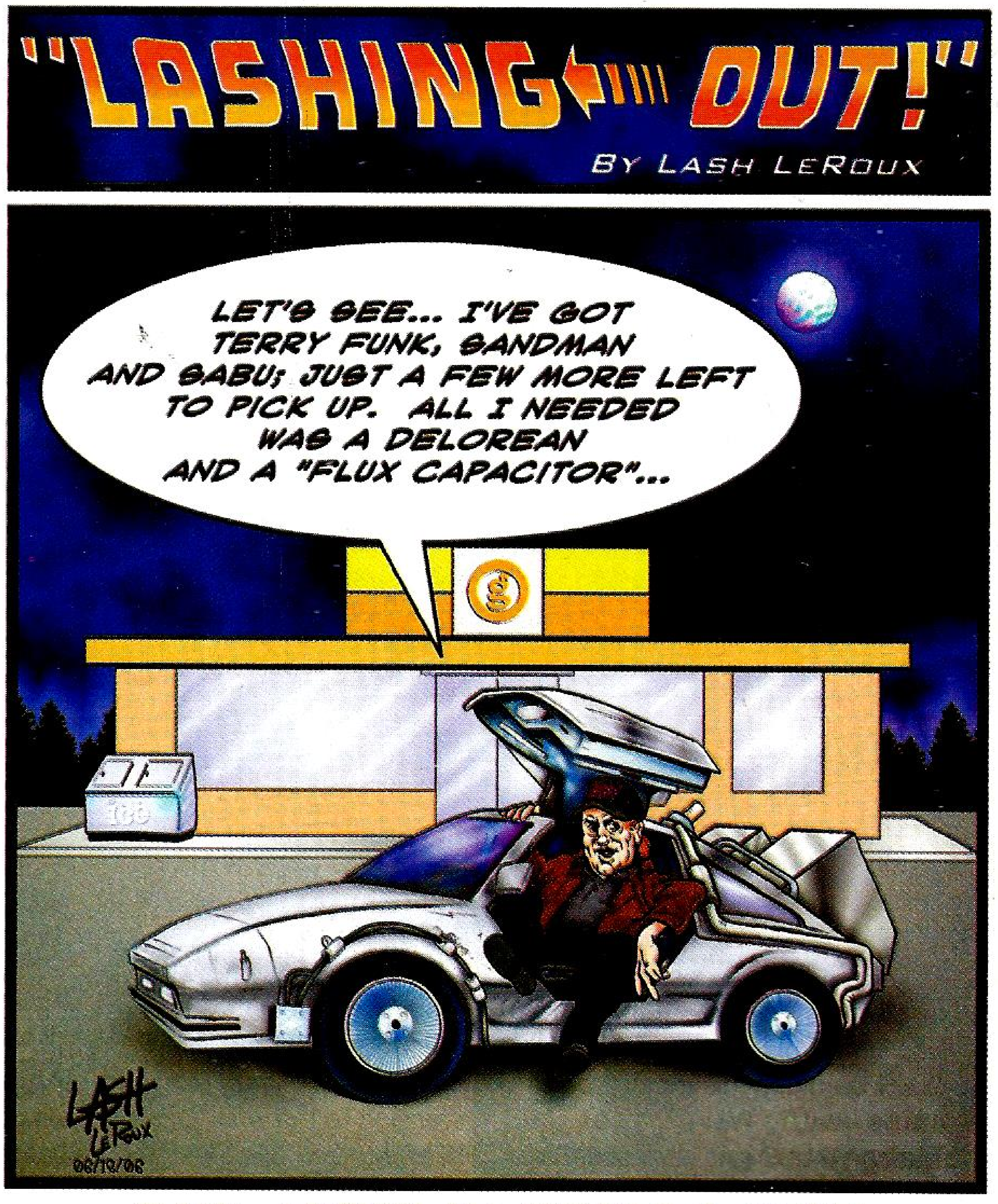
But things were hardly cut and dry as Van Dam only scored the pinfall over **John Cena** after referees **John Finnegan** and **Nick Patrick** were knocked out. It was actually Heyman who ran to the ring to make the three-count.

Van Dam—and Heyman—may certainly have preferred a less controversial finish to the match to start the new ECW era, but the capacity crowd in New York's Hammerstein Ballroom got what they paid to see—Cena's shoulders pinned to the mat and the title change hands.

It's still early to pass judgment on the new ECW, but there were certainly some pros and cons apparent at the debut pay-per-view. One negative was the preponderance of WWE talent on the card and relatively few old faces from ECW showing up. **Bill Alfonso**, **Danny Doring**, **Mikey Whipwreck**, and **Justin Credible** were a few familiar faces from the past that appeared at the end of the show to help RVD celebrate his win, but they did not compete.

But, by and large, One Night Stand was an ECW card, with an *extremely* local ECW fan base.

"It may have been the loudest I've ever heard the fans at an ECW card,



"LASHING OUT!"
BY LASH LEROUX
LET'S SEE... I'VE GOT TERRY FUNK, SANDMAN AND SABU; JUST A FEW MORE LEFT TO PICK UP. ALL I NEEDED WAS A DELOREAN AND A "FLUX CAPACITOR"...
LASH LeROUX 06/19/06

PAUL HEYMAN BRINGS ECW "BACK TO THE FUTURE"...

Condolences go out to the friends and family of John "Earthquake" Tenta who passed away at the age of 42 from bladder cancer. Tenta enjoyed his greatest success and main-event status as "Earthquake" in the WWF in the early 1990s.

especially during the Van Dam-Cena match" said **Joey Styles**.

In the other title match at One Night Stand, **Rey Misterio Jr.** once again managed to hold on to the Smackdown World title against incredible odds as his match against **Sabu** ended in a no-contest. Of late, Misterio has been utterly dominated by **Mark Henry**, **Kane**, **The Great Khali**, and even **Finlay**, but he has somehow managed to hold on to the championship longer than anyone could have expected.

Only time will tell if ECW can do in 2006 what it failed to do in 2000—thrive on national cable-TV and continue to build new stars to replace headliners who have either moved on or retired.

Two nights before ECW returned in New York, TNA was getting hardcore at the former ECW Arena. On June 9, TNA held a rare house show dubbed "Hardcore War" in Philadelphia, headlined by a four-corners tag team match that went to a no-contest featuring **Team 3D**, **The James Gang**, **A.J. Styles** & **Christopher Daniels**, and **Americas Most Wanted**. The match was called after approximately 300 steel chairs were thrown into the ring at the request of **Brother Ray**.

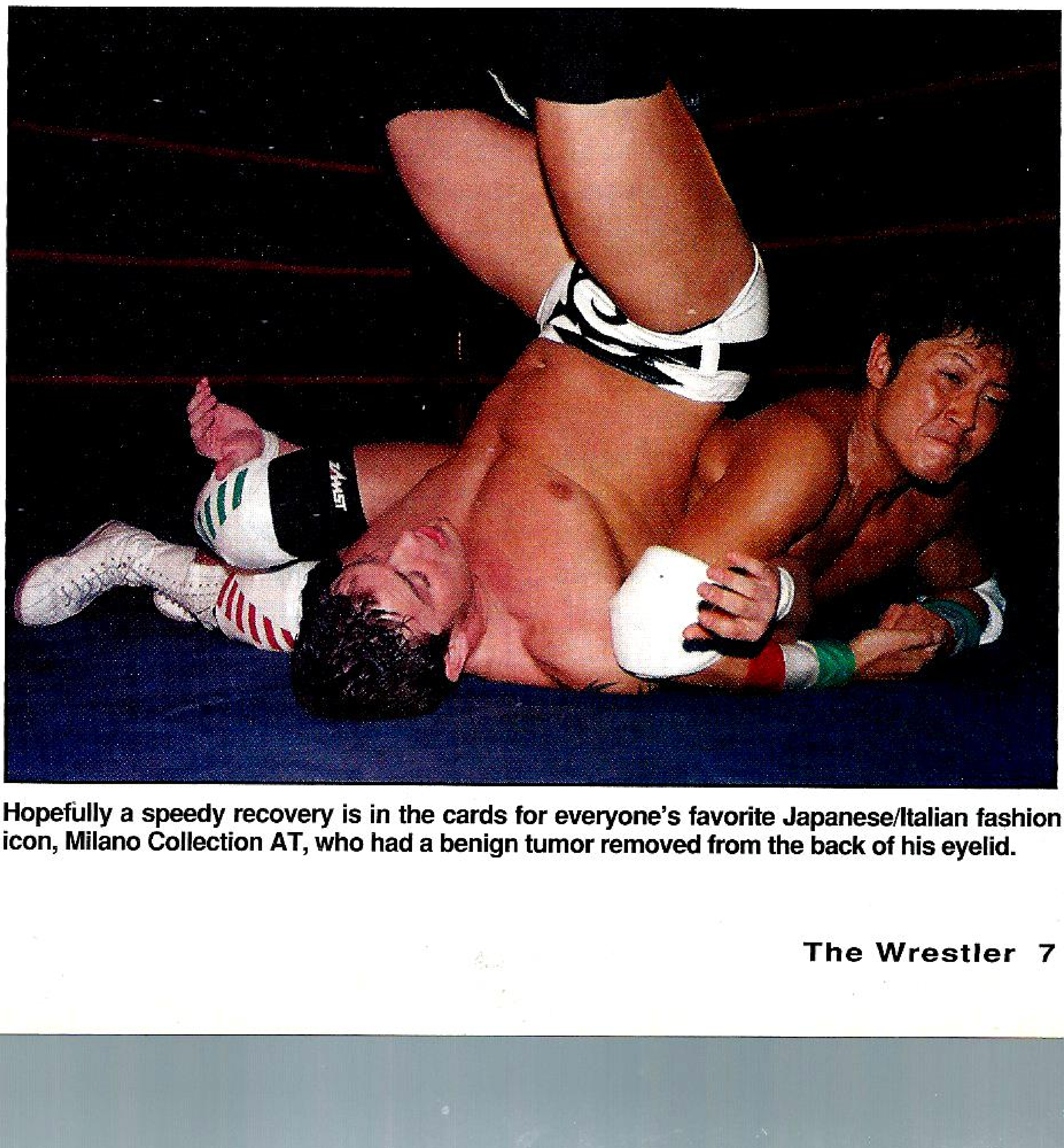
In other matches, **Shark Boy** defeated **Simon Diamond**, **Jay Lethal** beat **Sonjay Dutt**, **Abyss** destroyed **Brother Runt**, **Traci Brooks** defeated **Gail Kim**, **Rhino pinned Jeff Jarrett**, **Petey Williams** beat **Jerry Lynn**, and X division champion **Samoa Joe** beat A.J. Styles and Christopher Daniels in a three-way match.

In a memorable moment, Brother Runt made his allegiances known by stating that he had refused to sign up for One Night Stand and declared his allegiance to TNA, tearing up what he said was a WWE contract to the delight of the TNA faithful.

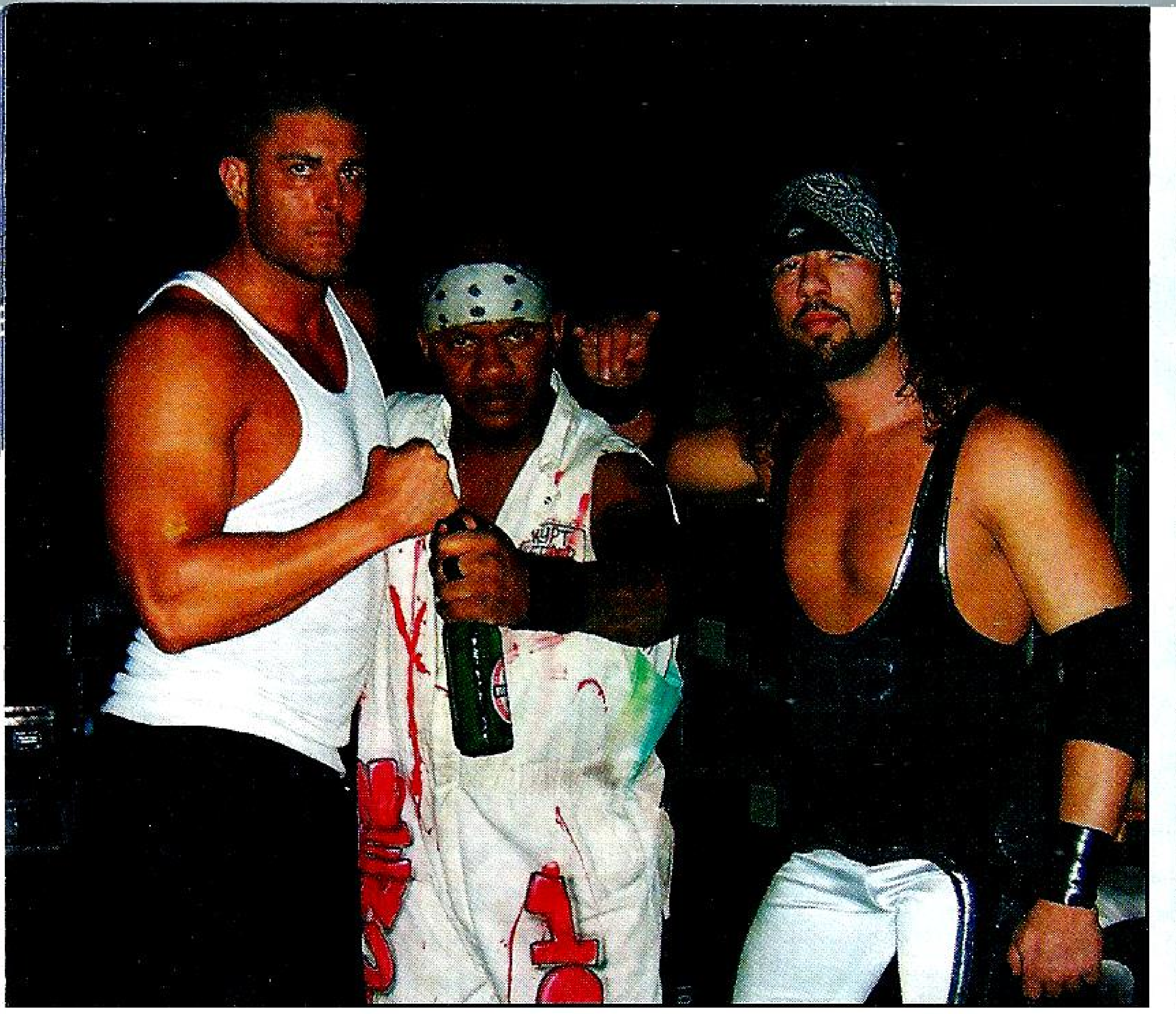
We are sad to report the passing of **John Tenta**, best known as **Earthquake**, who lost his battle to bladder cancer on June 7. Tenta wrestled and played football at Louisiana State University and took up sumo wrestling in Japan in the 1990s. In 1989, he joined the WWF as Earthquake and feuded with **Hulk Hogan** and **The Ultimate Warrior**. He faced Hogan in the main event of SummerSlam 1990 and held the WWF tag team title with **Typhoon** as **The Natural Disasters** in 1992. Tenta also competed as **Golga** in **The Oddities** and as **The Shark** in WCW. Tenta, 42, is survived by his wife and three children.

Tokyo's favorite would-be pro wrestling fashion model, **Milano Collection AT**, is recovering after having a benign tumor surgically removed from behind his eyelid. We wish him the best in his recovery.

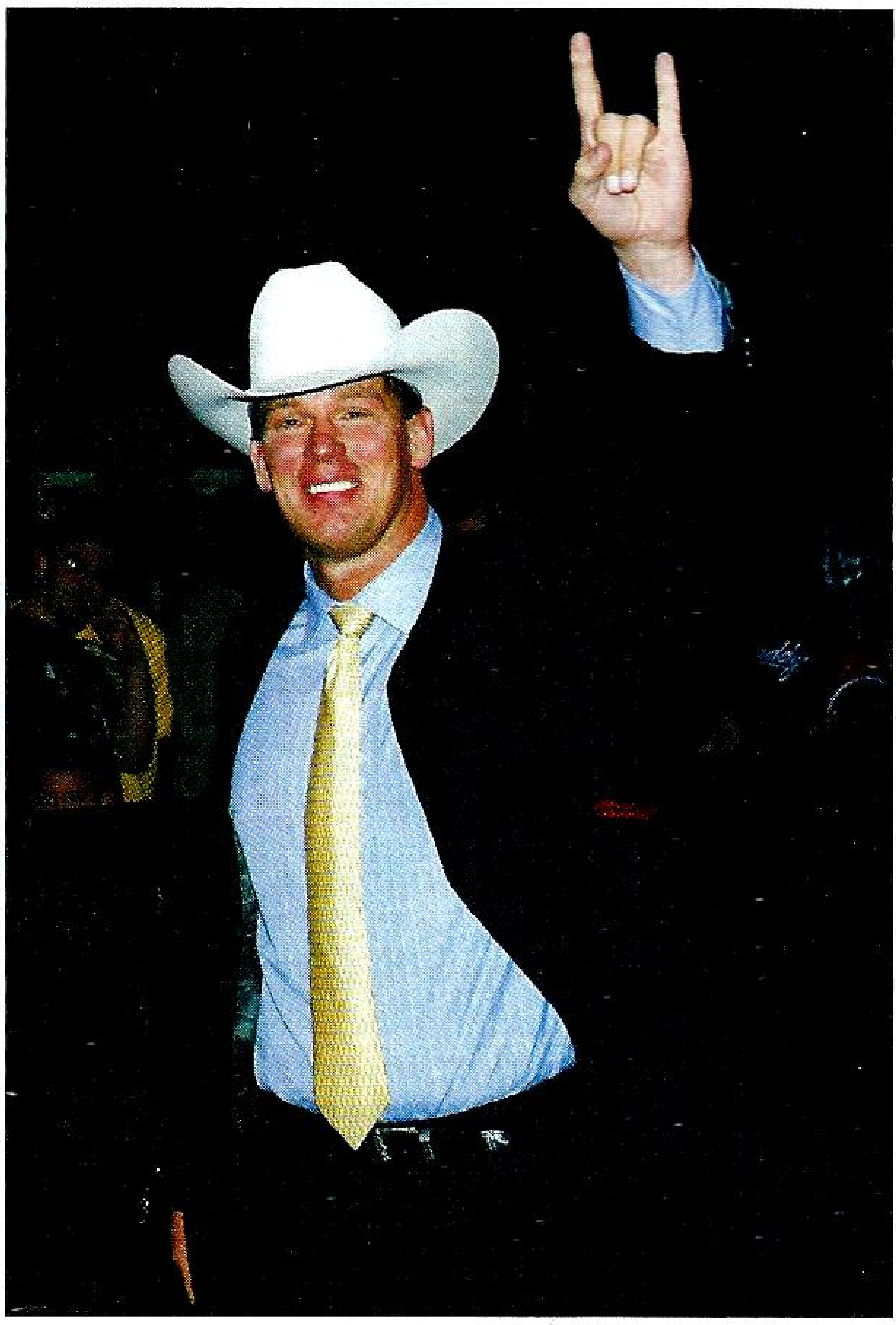
OVW competitor **Seth Skyfire** has signed a WWE developmental contract, while his storyline girlfriend **Shelley Martinez** is reportedly headed to ECW.



Hopefully a speedy recovery is in the cards for everyone's favorite Japanese/Italian fashion icon, Milano Collection AT, who had a benign tumor removed from the back of his eyelid.



MTV's venture into professional wrestling—Wrestling Society X—appears to still be a priority to network executives, who have gone so far as to renew the contracts of many key members of the promotion, such as Aaron Aguilera and Sean Waltman (New Jack, center, is believed to be holding out for a deal with ECW).



At ECW One Night Stand, the always-controversial John Bradshaw Layfield made a brief appearance to promote his move from the ring to the announce table as the new color commentator for Smackdown. Layfield has been hampered by nagging injuries and will use the time to recover before resuming in-ring activities.

In this month's bizarre news story, woman wrestler **Julie Utley** is fighting a Missouri law that requires female wrestlers to undergo a pregnancy test within a week prior to every match. In an Associated Press story, Utley said the law invades her privacy and that the tests are too expensive, as tests could cost up to $60 per month, since the law stipulates that tests must be conducted by a doctor, and not via simple over-the-counter kits.

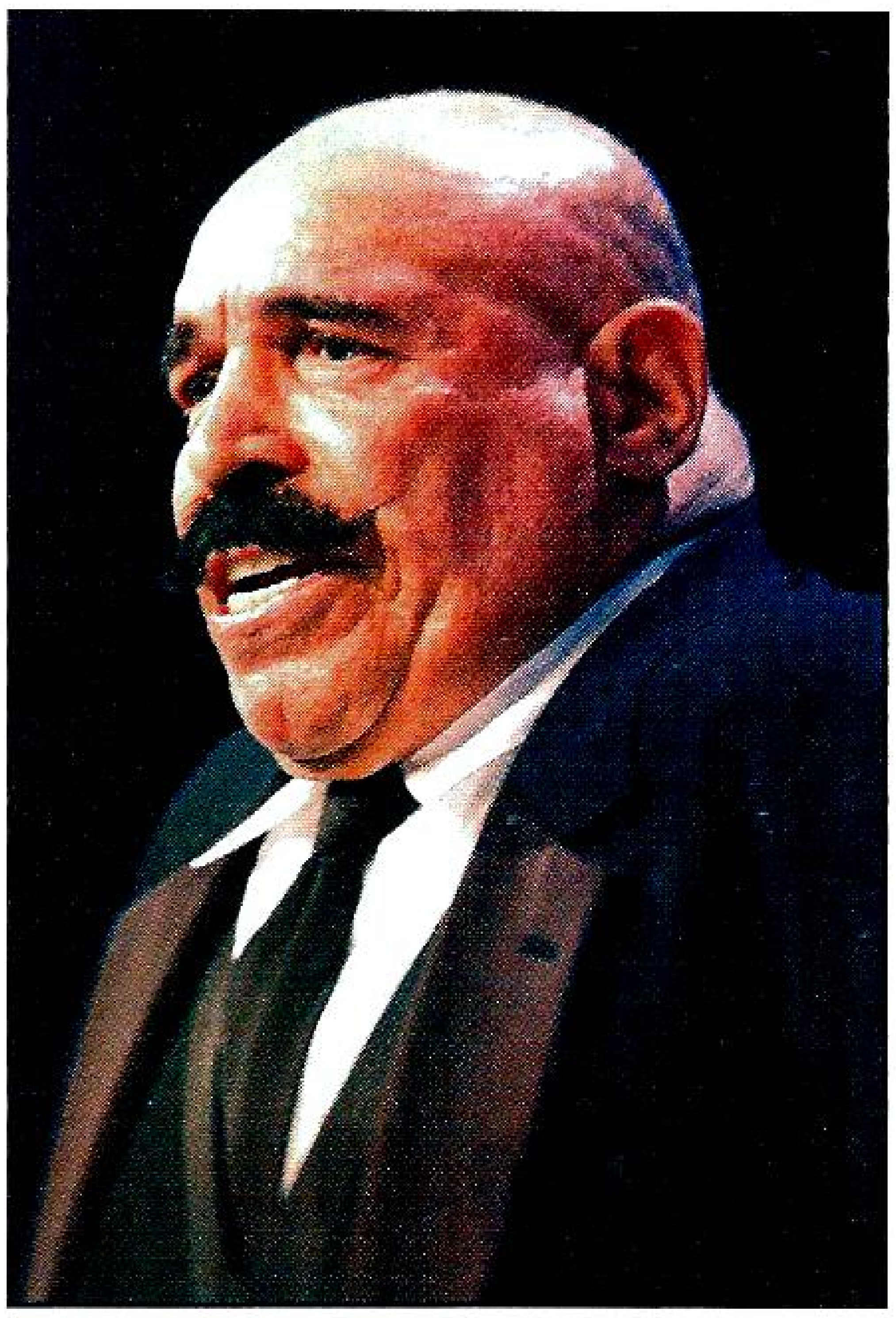
"There is a lot of punishment in professional wrestling. I knew the risk. I knew I was going to get injured," Utley said. "That was my personal responsibility. This rule takes control away from me."

It looks like MTV's Wrestling Society X project may still have legs. The upstart promotion has re-signed **Teddy Hart**, **Vampiro**, **Sean Waltman**, **Aaron Aguilera**, **Jack Evans**, **Kaos**, **Altar Boy Luke**, and **Alkatrazz** to contract extensions. If green-lighted, the underground-style wrestling show could air on MTV, Comedy Central, or VH-1.

Just as it looked like **Rick Steiner** was all set to win a seat on the Cherokee County school board, he was dealt a blow when it was ruled that he needed to register under his given name of **Robert Rechsteiner**. He currently is seeking 4,634 signatures on a petition to run as an independent candidate.

Smackdown may have lost **Kurt Angle** to ECW and **Randy Orton** to Raw, but new color commentator **John Bradshaw Layfield** says he's more than enough of an attraction to bring ratings back up. "It's not every day when wrestling fans can sit down and enjoy two hours of insight from a wrestling god such as myself," JBL said. "Ratings will go up, as will the collective IQ of the *Smackdown* television audience."

Finally, on a recent edition of *Jimmy Kimmel Live*, **Kimmel**, reporting on the death of al Qaeda terrorist Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, joked that **The Iron Sheik** is now number one of the FBI's Most Wanted list. Considering some of the Sheik's recent rants (against Hulk Hogan and **Brian Blair**, most notably)—which have become some of the most talked about Internet viewing amongst wrestling fans in years—Kimmel's producers should probably expect the most surreal phone call of their lives. ☐



The Iron Sheik has been the talk of the Internet world by cutting vicious, adult-rated promos against former nemeses such as Brian Blair and Hulk Hogan. Sheik, who never missed an opportunity to speak his mind, still remains active on legends tours and appearances.

no holds barred

With Will Welsh

THE WRESTLING WARS are back on. More than five years after the demise of both ECW and WCW gave WWE a near monopoly over the industry, TNA and the newly revived ECW are pitted against one another. Unlike the Monday Night Wars, their respective television shows don't broadcast against one another or even appear on the same evening, but TNA views ECW as its primary competition, and it is arguable that ECW was re-launched in an effort to put smaller promotions such as TNA out of business in order to give WWE an even bigger market share.

Even though the propaganda hasn't yet started, make no mistake: TNA and ECW are at war. It's entirely possible that only one of the two will survive the clash. After all, there's only so much wrestling the market can handle at this point, and four major promotions (okay, three major WWE brands and one other wholly distinct promotion) could very well push the limit of what fans will accept and support.

TNA might walk away from the battle beaten, bruised, and bloodied, but, if only one of the two companies is going to survive their clash, it's going to be TNA.

That's right, TNA is going to outlast ECW.

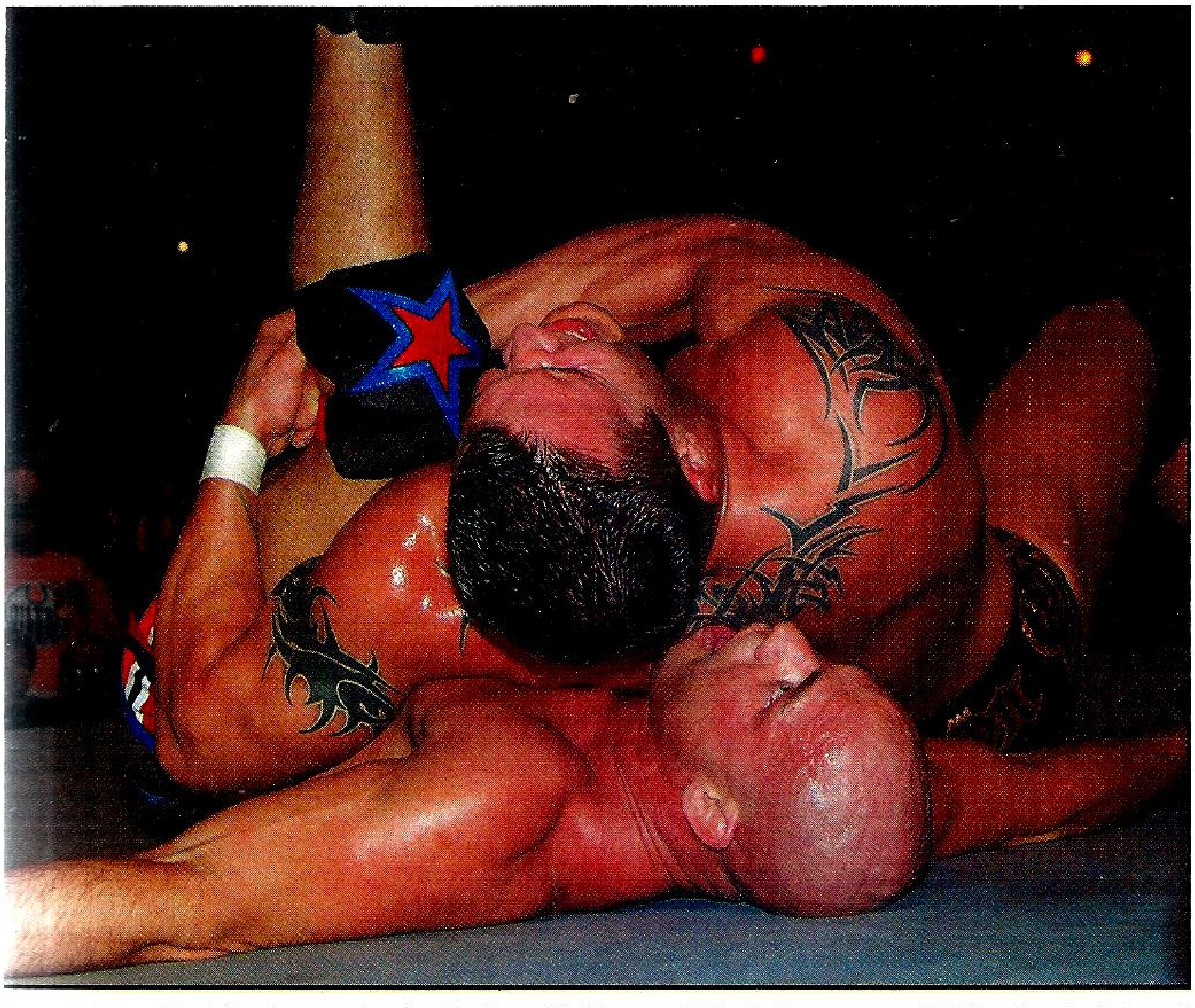
To those who follow this column regularly, the pronouncement that I believe TNA will outlive ECW might come as something of shock. I've alluded to my prior allegiance to ECW numerous times and have also made it clear that I believe Paul Heyman possesses one of the most ingenious wrestling minds of this or any other generation.

To say that I have held a favorable bias toward ECW would be acceptable and correct—and yet I still believe that TNA is going to outperform and, yes, eventually outlast its most direct competitor.

As of this filing, the second One Night Stand pay-per-view hadn't taken place and the brand's new television show still hadn't launched, yet everything that I have observed and learned about the re-launch has me convinced that WWE is going to have trouble making this work.

WWE seemed to have cleared its first major obstacle by securing placement on a national cable network. I guess in a world where the NHL can be viewed on the Outdoor Life Network, it isn't too much of a stretch to have ECW on the Sci-Fi Network, but SFN's core audience was in an uproar over the decision. We're not quite sure if we should give much credence to the rumor that ECW was being pressured to debut a vampire-based tag team or unit as part of this movement, but appeasement and ECW don't seem to mix very well. Vampire rumors aside, any pressure placed on ECW and Heyman to compromise in any way will do major harm to the project.

I also found disturbing that in the weeks prior to One Night Stand, the pay-per-view began to feel more like a tertiary WWE pay-per-view than an ECW revival pay-per-view. Kurt Angle vs. Randy Orton on One Night Stand? Why not book Triple-H vs. The Rock? Or Steve Austin vs. Hulk Hogan? If WWE can't hope to properly fill out a card for a one-night pay-per-view, how does it



Even Kurt Angle was shocked to learn that he would be taking on non-ECW'er Randy Orton at One Night Stand II. The not-so-grand re-launch of the renegade brand, under the WWE banner, will have difficultly standing up to the tests of time, in Welsh's view.

For TNA to be successful in its first true battle with WWE, the entire roster must be on the same page and mobilized in a common goal. Everyone from main-eventers to those occupying the mid-card (such as The Diamonds in the Rough) must compete at their highest level if the promotion is to cement itself as a viable competitor to the WWE-promoted ECW.

hope to fill out a roster for a regularly touring brand?

Then there's TNA, which has been battling critics from the moment it debuted back in the summer of 2002. Prior to the re-launch of ECW, TNA was an island all unto itself. It clearly wasn't competing against WWE (at least not directly), yet it also wasn't truly competing against smaller promotions such as Ring of Honor, either. Through sheer effort and hard work—and quite a bit of stubbornness—it had carved its own little niche in the wrestling marketplace and was reaping praise from Spike TV executives who were more than pleased with the ratings (especially among 18–34-year-old males). Now, however, TNA has to do something that it hasn't had to do before: defend its turf. WWE never really seemed to pay TNA any mind, and though TNA had blocked many of its wrestlers from wrestling for Ring of Honor for a short period of time, the rivalry that those two promotions had was made out to be bigger than it ever actually was. With the re-launch of ECW—right at the same time that TNA was starting to test the waters of a touring schedule—TNA finally has something to fight against instead of something to fight for.

The distinction is huge.

Now the boys have something to rally around, a call to answer, and an enemy to defeat. If TNA is going to succeed against ECW and keep increasing its market share, it is going to have to outperform the WWE-backed monster. Storylines will have to become crisper (and they will), the wrestlers will have to become even more dedicated to TNA than they already are (and they will be), and the entire company as a whole will have to step up its game (and it will). Even Spike TV will have to step up its already considerable efforts to increase awareness of TNA.

Thanks to the arrival of ECW, TNA no longer will have the luxury of putting together a bad episode of *Impact* or throwing together a gimmicky pay-per-view such as the much-maligned Lockdown, in which every match was held inside the six-sided cage. In its new battle against ECW, TNA will be forced into becoming sharper and more focused than ever before. Each and every wrestler within the TNA locker room is going to have to sit down and look at himself in the mirror: *Am I doing all that I can to make TNA better? Am I being the best wrestler that I can be? What should I do to ensure this promotion's success?*

For ECW, the fight for success is just beginning. For TNA, the fight has been underway for years, but many of its wrestlers and executives are only now hearing the battle cry. □

blindsided

By Harry Burkett

TERRY FUNK SCREAMED "My eye, my eye!" as Mick Foley took his arm, wrapped in barbed wire, and ground it into Funk's eye and forehead. While many of the fans at New York's Hammerstein Ballroom chanted "Terry, Terry!" to encourage the hardcore icon, there were several others—especially the uninitiated WWE fans watching One Night Stand at home—who worried about the 61-year-old's health and well-being.

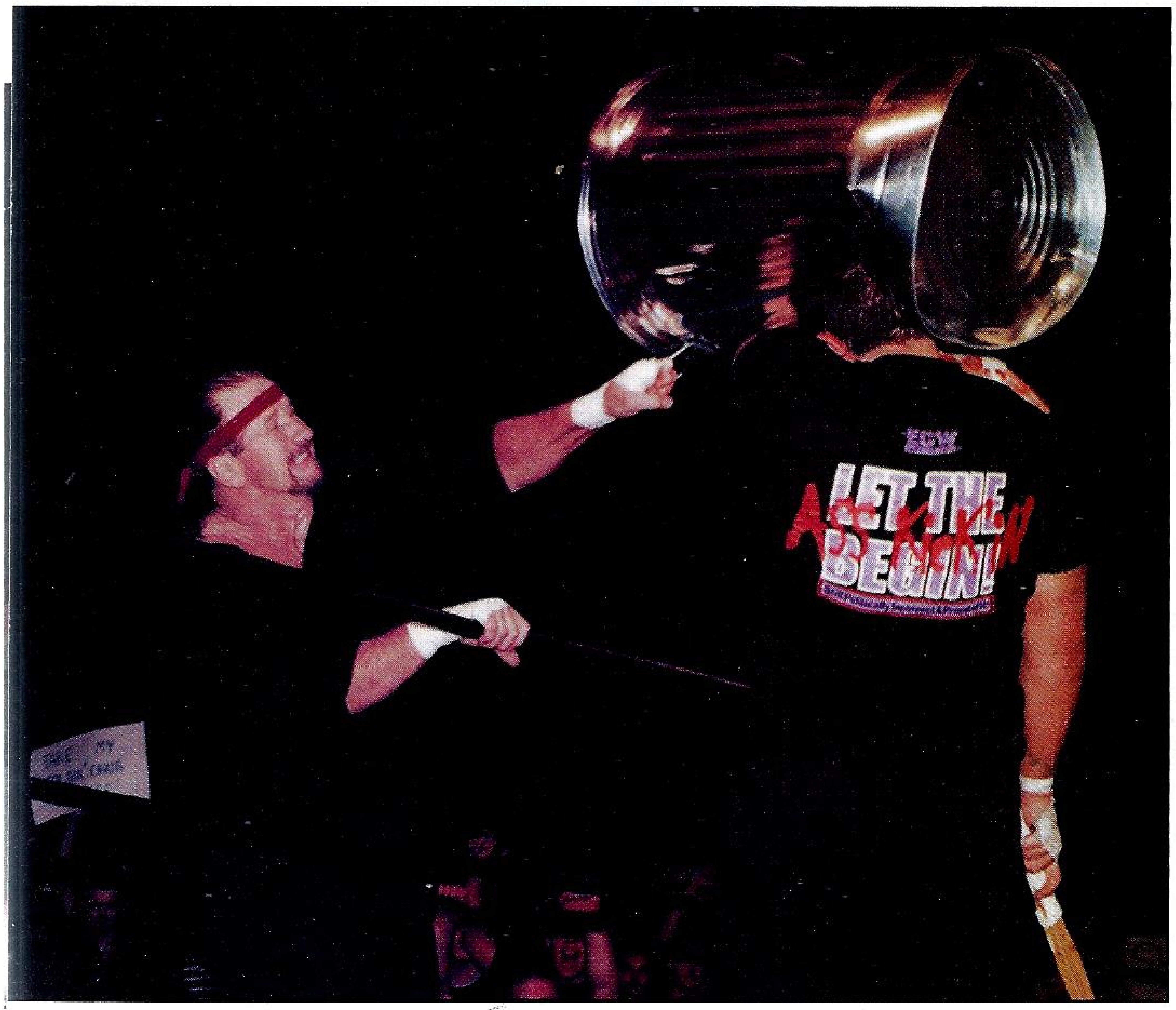
Trainers rushed Funk to the backstage area as blood poured out of his head and eye. When was the last time Funk was taken out of a match because he could no longer endure the punishment? I, for one, can't remember when that has ever happened ... and I've seen "The Funker" in some brutal battles.

Funk's partner was in no condition to help. *Lita*—not Foley and not Edge—was dominating Tommy Dreamer. She leg-dropped a baseball bat wrapped in barbed wire across Dreamer's crotch. The situation deteriorated for Dreamer and his wife, Beulah, in the six-man tag team match as Foley, Edge, and Lita were poised to do some real damage. Foley put Beulah in the mandible claw and Edge speared Dreamer.

Finally, Funk emerged from the backstage area with a 2 x 4 wrapped in barbed wire. Beulah, barely recovered from the mandible claw, lit it on fire. Funk swung wide with the barbed torch, hitting Foley in the midsection and across the back. Foley's famous flannel coat caught fire. Funk knocked Foley out of the ring and through a table wrapped in barbed wire.

Despite Funk's ruthlessness, Edge, Lita, and the scorched Foley won the match when Edge viciously speared Beulah for the three-count. One image I will always remember from this match is the expression of sympathy and helplessness on Dreamer's face as Foley gouged Funk's eye with the jagged metal wire.

The whole time, I had one simple question: Why?



Allegiances meant nothing to Terry Funk in his first go-round with ECW. His history of attacking both Mick Foley and protégé Tommy Dreamer (pictured) are all part of his mystique. The "old" Funk would likely have turned against himself today, were it possible.

I realize Mick Foley turned against Dreamer on *Raw*, and that was the action that led to this smorgasbord of violence. A week later, when Funk confronted Foley about his misdeed, Foley attacked Funk. So, it seemed only natural that Dreamer and Funk would face Foley and his new ally, Edge, at One Night Stand. It was only a few minutes before that scheduled match that Beulah and Lita became part of the mix.

Why would Dreamer ever trust Funk? After all, in 1999, Funk turned against Dreamer in the same manner that Foley had turned against Dreamer. Funk, in a jealous rage over the attention Dreamer was getting at the time, attacked his protégé, causing him to lose a Singapore cane match to Justin Credible on pay-per-view. Dreamer was so upset by the whole encounter that all he could do was cry.

"Whatever that man does, I can't hate him," said Dreamer in the June 1999 issue of our sister publication *Wrestling Superstars*. "We spent too many nights on the road together. We covered each other's butts in too many bloody, hellish fights. It's like having a guy save your life on the battlefield, then being asked to hit him once you get home. What does Terry want from me?! Damn it! Tell me, what the hell does he want?!"

That bit of melodrama should give an accurate picture of how intense the Dreamer-Funk feud was at the time—and the severe sense of betrayal and loss that Dreamer felt when Funk turned against him. As for Funk, he was as incorrigible—and heartless—as ever.

"Is that egg-suckin' dog hidin' under his bed? [This] is about a young pup pretendin' to respect me when all he's doin' is ridin' my coattails. I don't need no respect. I beat it out of people. Dreamer doesn't deserve to say he respects me. He hasn't paid the price for it—yet."

Funk has taken on more of a levelheaded, facilitator-type role in the spat between Foley and Dreamer, choosing the side of "The Innovator Of Violence." This apparent change of heart may do more harm than good to Funk's image in the new ECW.

So, this is how we left the Dreamer-Funk saga seven years ago. With that in mind, I don't understand why Funk and Dreamer now have this father-son bond. And why are they being so hard on Foley? Funk has double-crossed nearly as many people as Ric Flair. Dreamer has taken pride in being ECW's martyr for over a decade now. When Foley attacked Dreamer and told Funk exactly how he felt before attacking *him*, I would have thought that might have earned Foley some respect in the bizarro world of ECW.

Let's examine Foley's complaints about Dreamer and Funk. Dreamer has been a behind-the-scenes worker for WWE over the past couple of years, has been on *Raw* very little, and, in fact, has spent most of his time in Ohio Valley helping to train up-and-comers and contributing creatively to OVW's weekly program. All of a sudden, he wants to help Foley against Edge. Maybe Foley, who had just been through hell and back with Edge at WrestleMania 22, had a bit more respect for Edge than a relatively obscure guy eager to capitalize on the latest ECW comeback. When Foley attacked Dreamer, he sent a message, ECW-style.

And why should Foley appreciate Funk sticking his nose into their business? There was Foley, live on *Raw*, listening to Funk lecture him as if he were a child. The old Terry Funk would have chastised Dreamer for being a crybaby and not kicking Foley's butt sooner. The kindler, gentler Funk tried to act like the elder statesmen, attempting to keep the peace between his hardcore children.

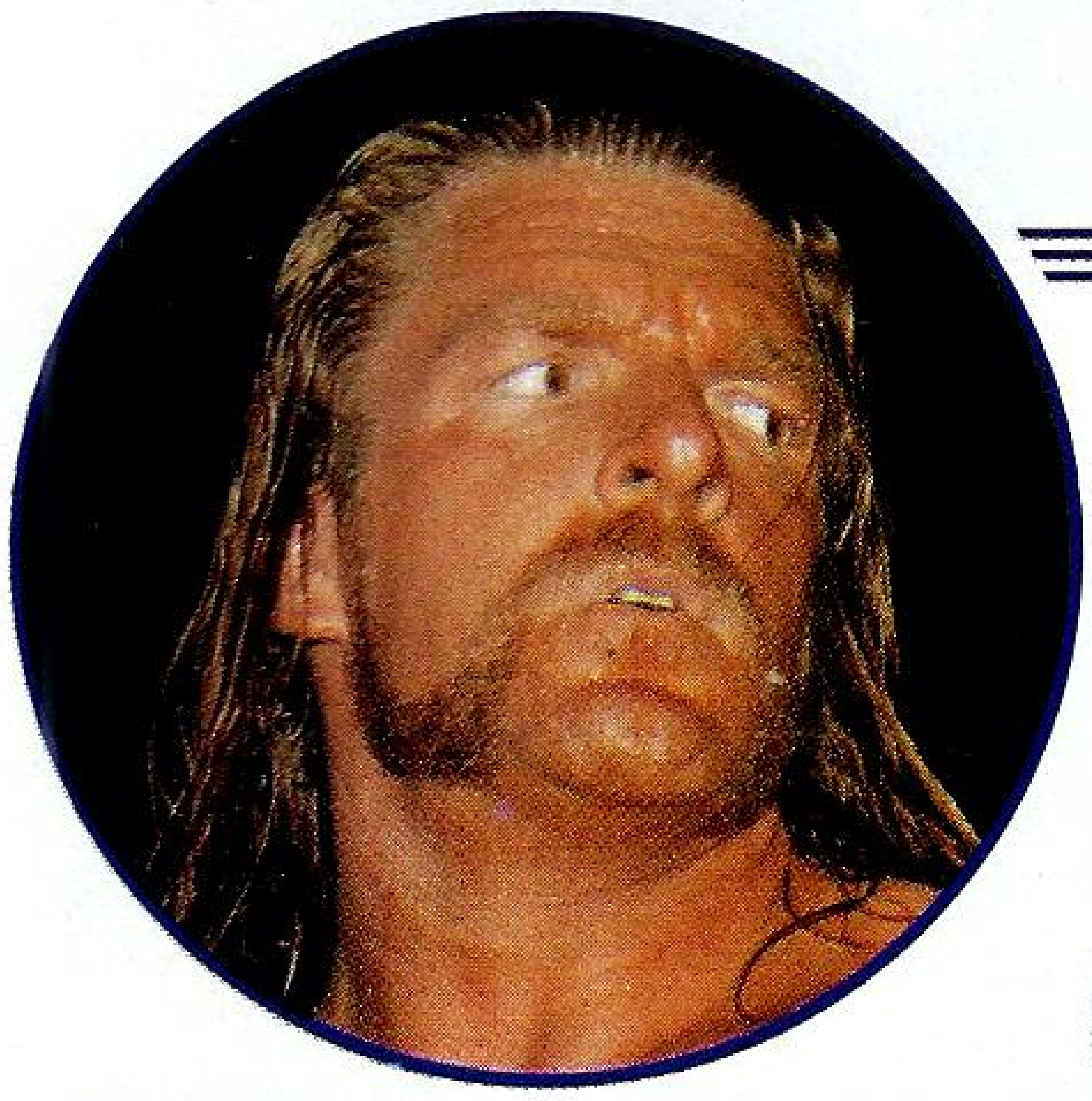
There's something sick about all that. After all, Funk is the same man who once told Dreamer: "Pounding [Foley's] head with my fists is just somethin' I do for kicks. I've beaten him in the mental department. His mama and daddy didn't want him. And I don't want him. As long as he's worried about me, he's thinkin' about his mama, his daddy, and everybody who knows him for the fake he is. It's gonna get to the point that he can't beat nobody. Then the puke can go live in a cardboard box."

That's vintage Funk, and that's vintage ECW. I'm tempted to say that Dreamer deserves anything that he gets, that Foley should take pleasure in punishing him, and that Funk ought to turn against him again ... and make Beulah watch.

But I won't say that. I'm just demonstrating how the concepts of right and wrong are so twisted in ECW. In a world where there is no good or evil, just bad and cool-bad, it's easy to slip into a warped mentality. Dreamer and Foley should not respect Funk, or hold him out as a noble figure. Funk has done some sick things in ECW ... and so has Foley ... and so has just about everyone else from the original roster. Dreamer is the only person who has been a good guy consistently, but, with the "Innovator Of Violence," it's hard to gauge his moral compass.

Will ECW's concept of the antihero vs. villain work in 2006? I hope it does not. □

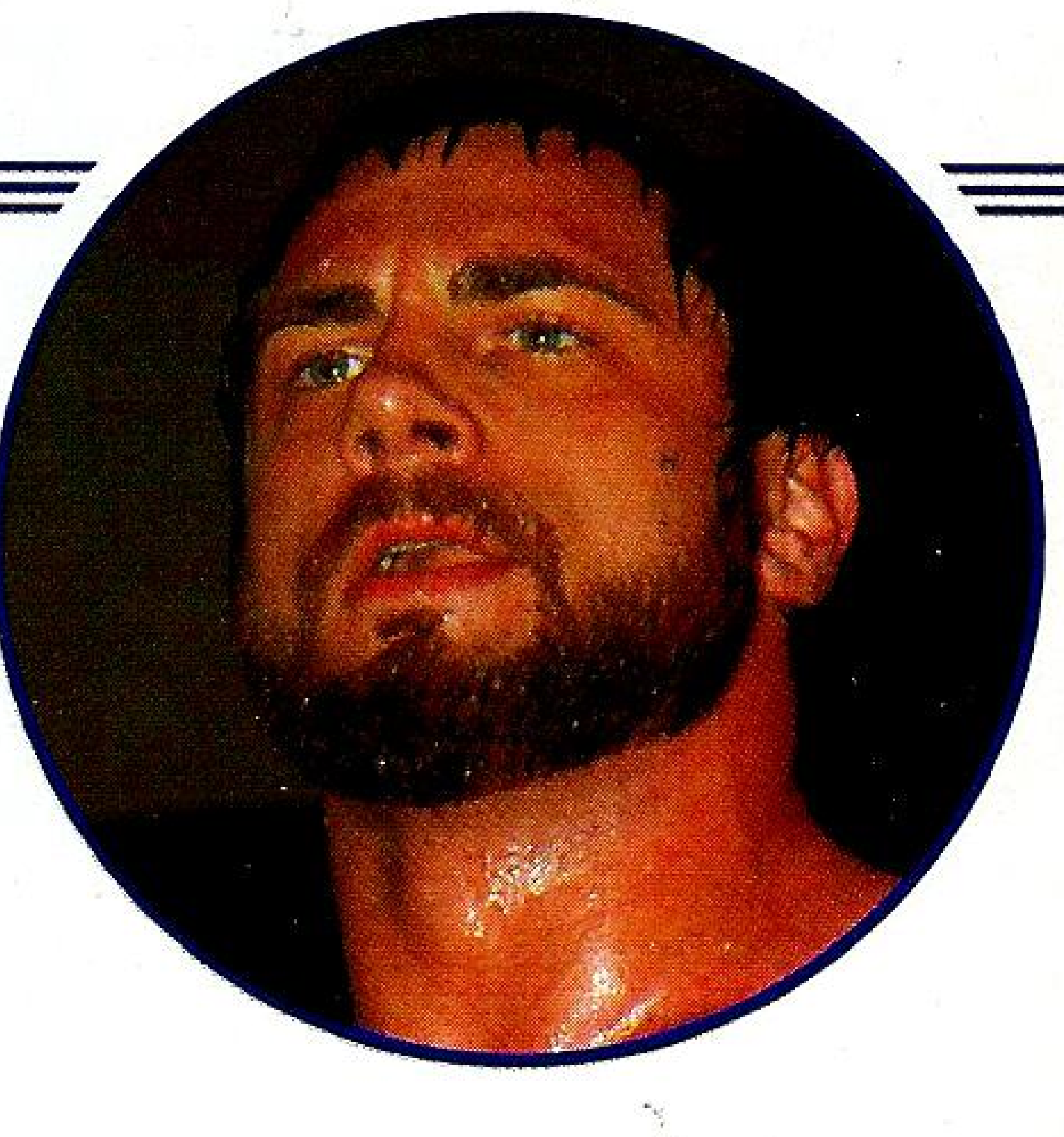
thumbs up



Thumbs Up to Triple-H. Triple-H had been kowtowing to Vince McMahon for so long that it must have absolutely felt natural to him. Sure, he had benefited from his tight relationship with the WWE owner and chairman, but when it came to their relationship, it was clear that McMahon was in charge. However, when McMahon asked Triple-H to join his most infamous club, he went a step too far. It's been quite a while since we've been able to cheer for Triple-H; it's good to have him back on the side of the good guys.

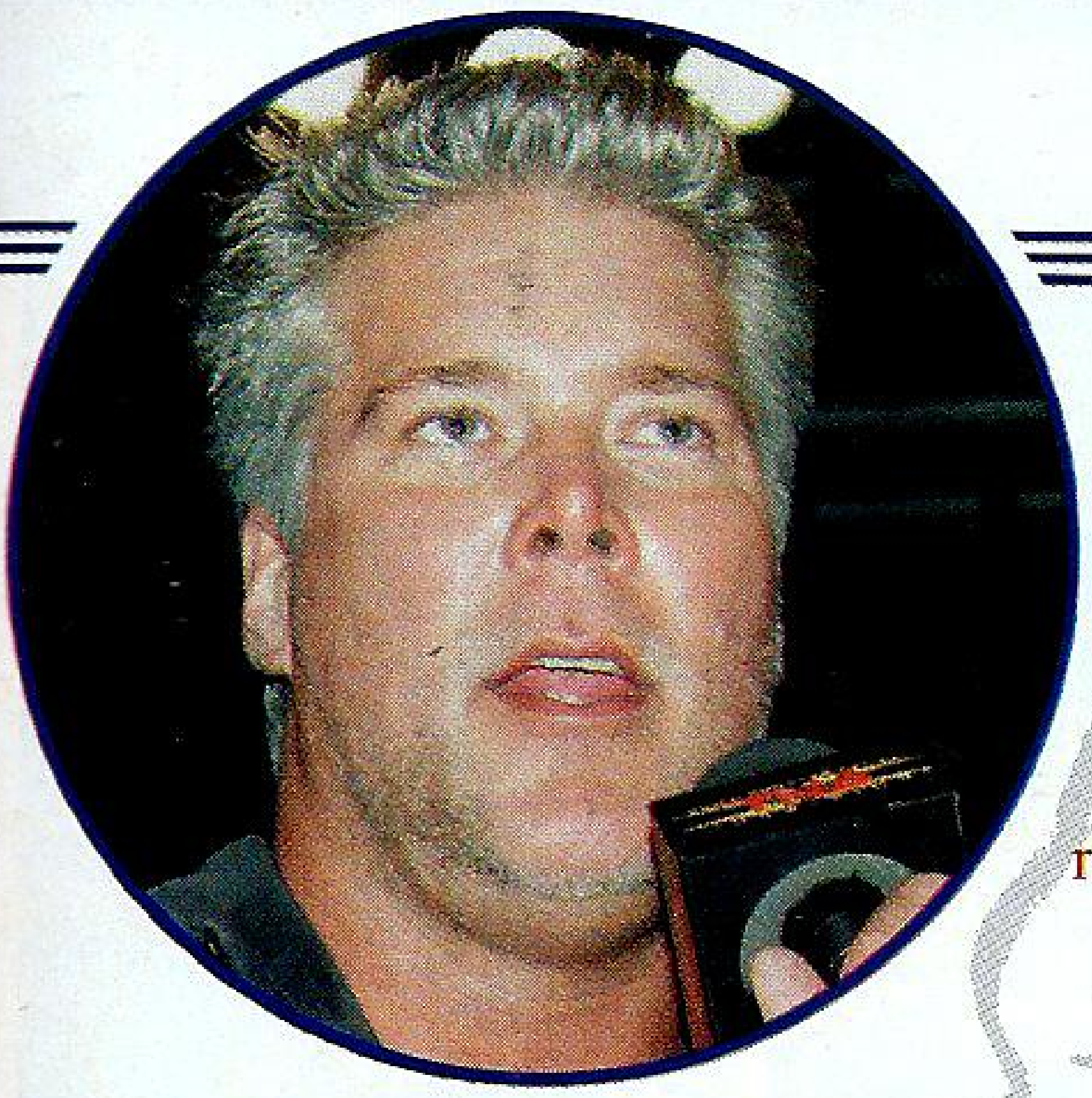
Thumbs Up to Dixie Carter. It takes a lot of guts to walk into the home of one of your biggest rivals and try to claim it for yourself—yet that's exactly what TNA and UWF executives had in mind when the promotions booked a date at the former ECW Arena in South Philadelphia. Considering that Ring of Honor and Combat Zone Wrestling run there regularly and that the newly revived ECW was to tour there shortly after TNA's appearance, we have to give credit to everyone involved in making this gutsy decision.

Thumbs Up to Christy Hemme. We're sure that there are a number of people reading this section who are surprised to see Hemme receiving a "Thumbs Up." Quite honestly, we're a bit shocked, too, because when WWE released its former Diva Search winner, we didn't think we'd see her again. Yet, there she is, continuing to ply her trade in TNA—and doing a darn good job of it, too. She hasn't let her WWE release affect her in any way: She's still the same, spunky gal we knew in WWE, and TNA is benefiting from her presence.



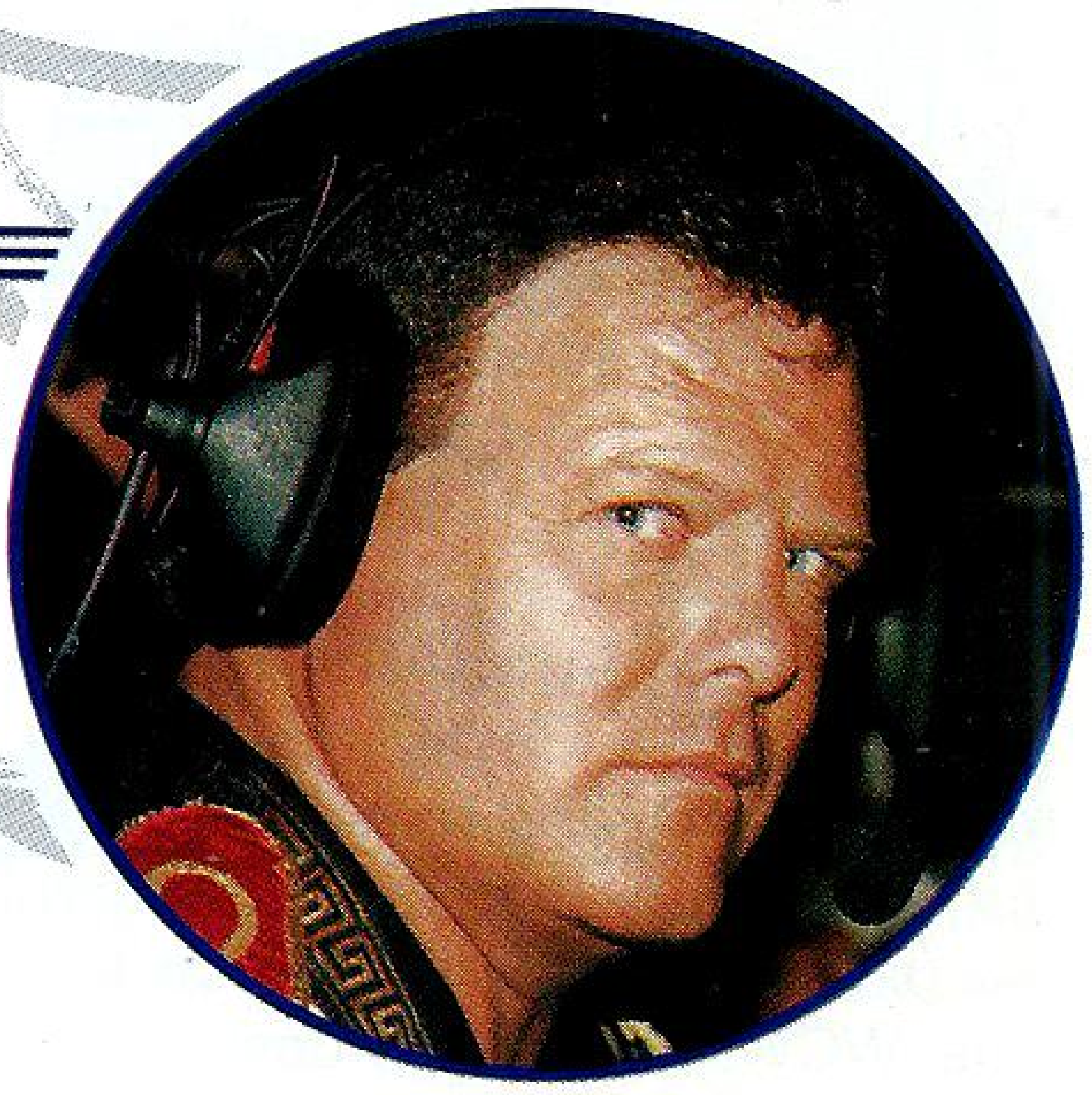
Thumbs Up to Austin Aries. Although he's the recognized leader of his team, this "Thumbs Up" could also go out to Aries' partner in Ring of Honor, Roderick Strong. Following their successful defeat of Tony Mamaluke and Sal Rinuaro in December of last year to win the ROH tag team title and, later, the loss of Generation Next members Jack Evans and Matt Sydal to Japanese commitments, Aries and Strong have established themselves as one of the premier tag teams in all of wrestling. Recently, the pair dumped the Generation Next moniker. Even they realize that they have finally arrived.

thumbs down



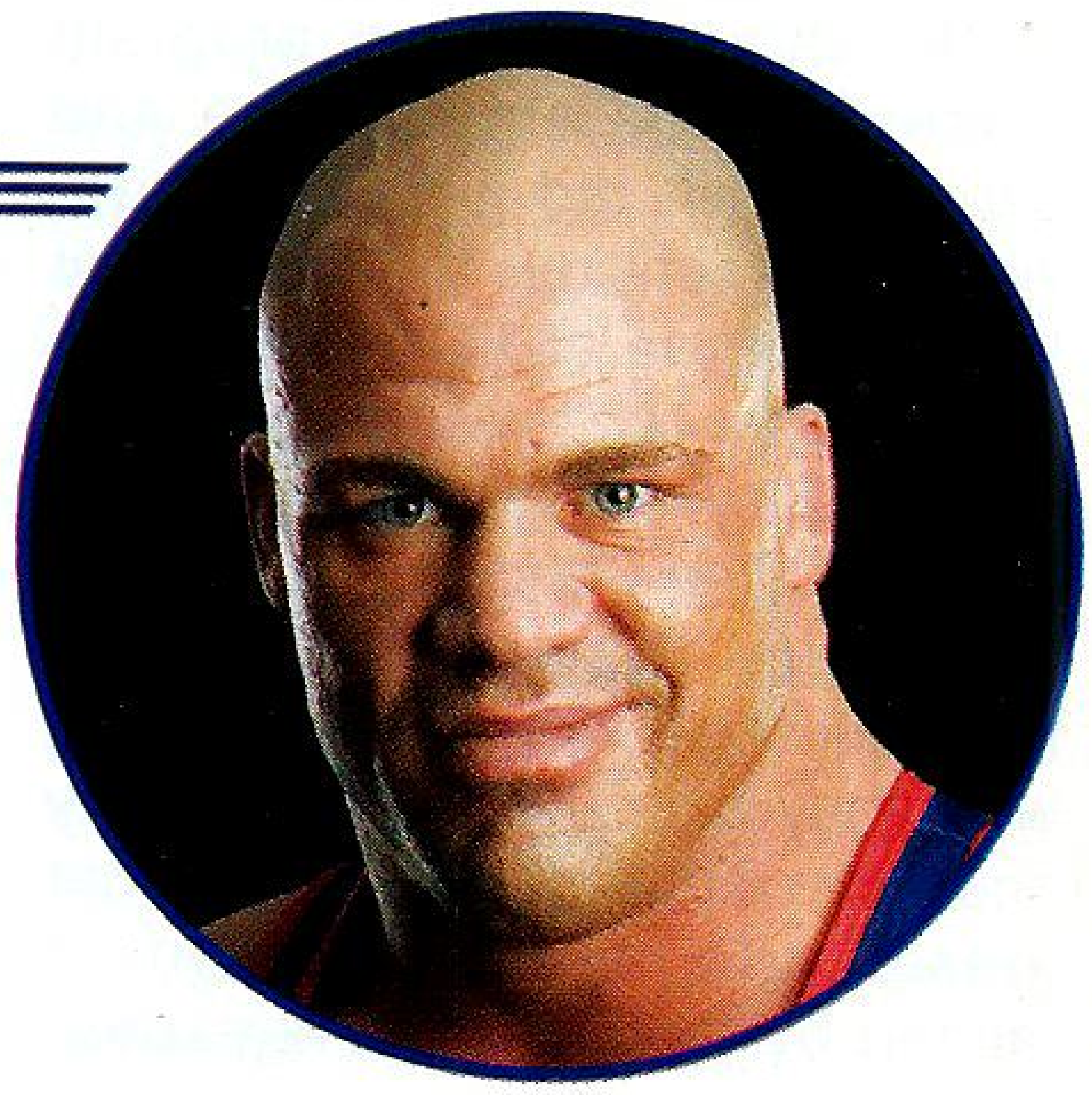
Thumbs Down to Kevin Nash. Size matters? Sure it does, especially when a man the size of Nash is attacking wrestlers half his size only moments after they've finished a match. However, if he is expecting us to be impressed with the way he's been attacking and manhandling X division wrestlers with jackknife power bombs, we can't say we have been. We're not sure of the point that Nash is trying to make in his quest to win the X championship, but here's hoping he's forcibly removed from the division sooner rather than later.

Thumbs Down to Jerry Lawler. Lawler is a bit funny when it comes to ECW. He's told us many times how much he hates the promotion and everything it stands for, yet, during its absence, when many former ECW wrestlers were wrestling for WWE, Lawler would often gush about their performances and proclaim their greatness. Now that many of those same wrestlers are once again aligned with ECW, he's back to hating on them. Why do three little letters have such an effect on him? We don't get it.



Thumbs Down to Mick Foley. Foley doesn't believe that his match against Edge at WrestleMania 22 was the best hardcore match ever. He truly doesn't believe that. He may say he does, but he doesn't. Was it good? Absolutely. His best ever? Far from it—and he knows it. Perhaps, with the rebirth of ECW, Foley is wishing that he could be a bigger part of it than his body will allow, so fighting against it and proclaiming his match against Edge to be the best hardcore match ever is his way of diminishing his pain.

Thumbs Down to Kurt Angle. So, Paul Heyman drafted Angle to ECW and Angle is happy about it. Yeah, right. If anything, Angle should be incredibly upset that he was drafted to ECW. His career is already likely to be cut short thanks to his beaten, battered, and broken neck. Over the past few years, he's missed more time due to injury than any other full-time top-tier WWE star. Now he's going to wrestle in ECW, where the wrestling is a more reckless and injuries are more frequent? If Angle were smart, he'd refuse the assignment—not be overjoyed by it.



point:

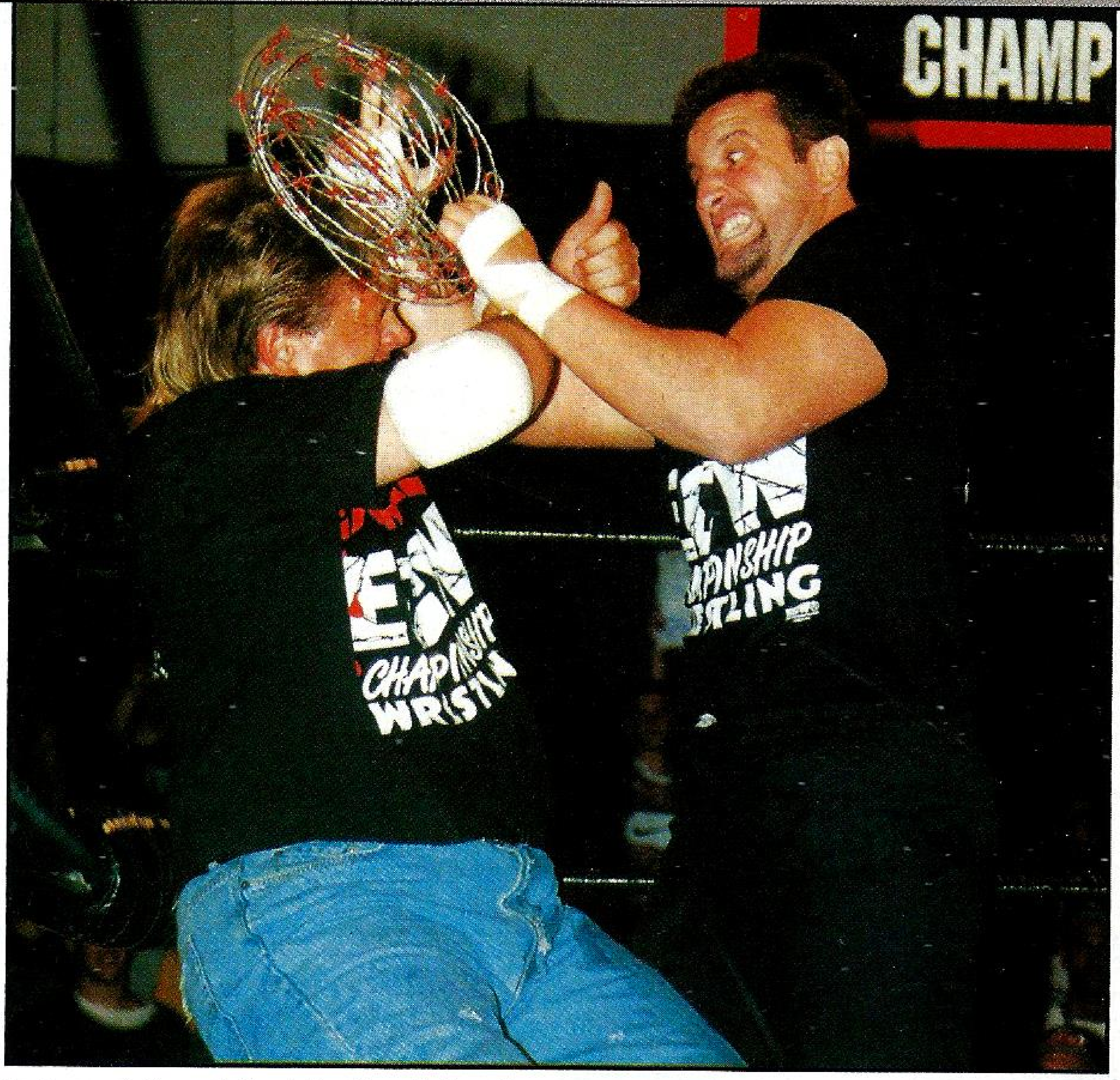
THE NEW ECW CAN RECAPTURE THE FEELING OF THE '90s

By Dave Lenker

AT FIRST GLANCE, it will probably seem as though the mere thought of resuscitating the ECW brand is some kind of WWE copout. Vince McMahon—I can already hear the skeptics saying—has finally run out of great new ideas and the only way to create wrestling's next big thing is by revisiting its last big thing.

For all its shortcomings—and there were several—ECW was indeed a very big thing for professional wrestling during the 1990s. Whether you enjoyed the use of tables, chairs, and barbed wire or not, the fact is that ECW charted the direction for WWE and, at the time, WCW, on a weekly basis.

What happened in that little bingo hall down in South Philly reverberated throughout wrestling so loudly that fans that tuned into *Raw* or *Nitro* often saw a watered-down version of what took place days or weeks before at the ECW Arena or Hammerstein Ballroom.



In the opinion of Contributing Editor Dave Lenker, ECW hardcore legends will now have the benefit of wrestling with the financial security of WWE instead of the fear of bankruptcy, as was the case under former owner Paul Heyman.

In that sense, ECW as a company was truly an innovator and, as such, should have no problem recreating the atmosphere and excitement it did a decade ago. When you consider the lineup that WWE's version of ECW is likely to feature, it's a can't-miss proposition.

Men like Rob Van Dam, Tommy Dreamer, The Sandman, and Terry Funk—just to name an obvious few—weren't simply the best at what they did; They were the *only* ones who did what they did. I doubt these performers have been so tainted by their post-ECW experience that they'll forget how to create the magic one more time.

The fact that WWE is financing this venture is immaterial at least and fortuitous at most. With WWE money driving the train, a regular, ongoing ECW promotion is not likely to run out of financial steam, as it did under Paul Heyman.

Ah, yes, the great Paul Heyman. Is there any WWE employee more qualified to spearhead the phenomenon he once created? Hardly. And if anyone understands what it will take to recreate the ECW vibe successfully, it's Paul E., who won't have to worry about the incessant talent raids from rival promotions, now that his superstars are really on the WWE payroll.

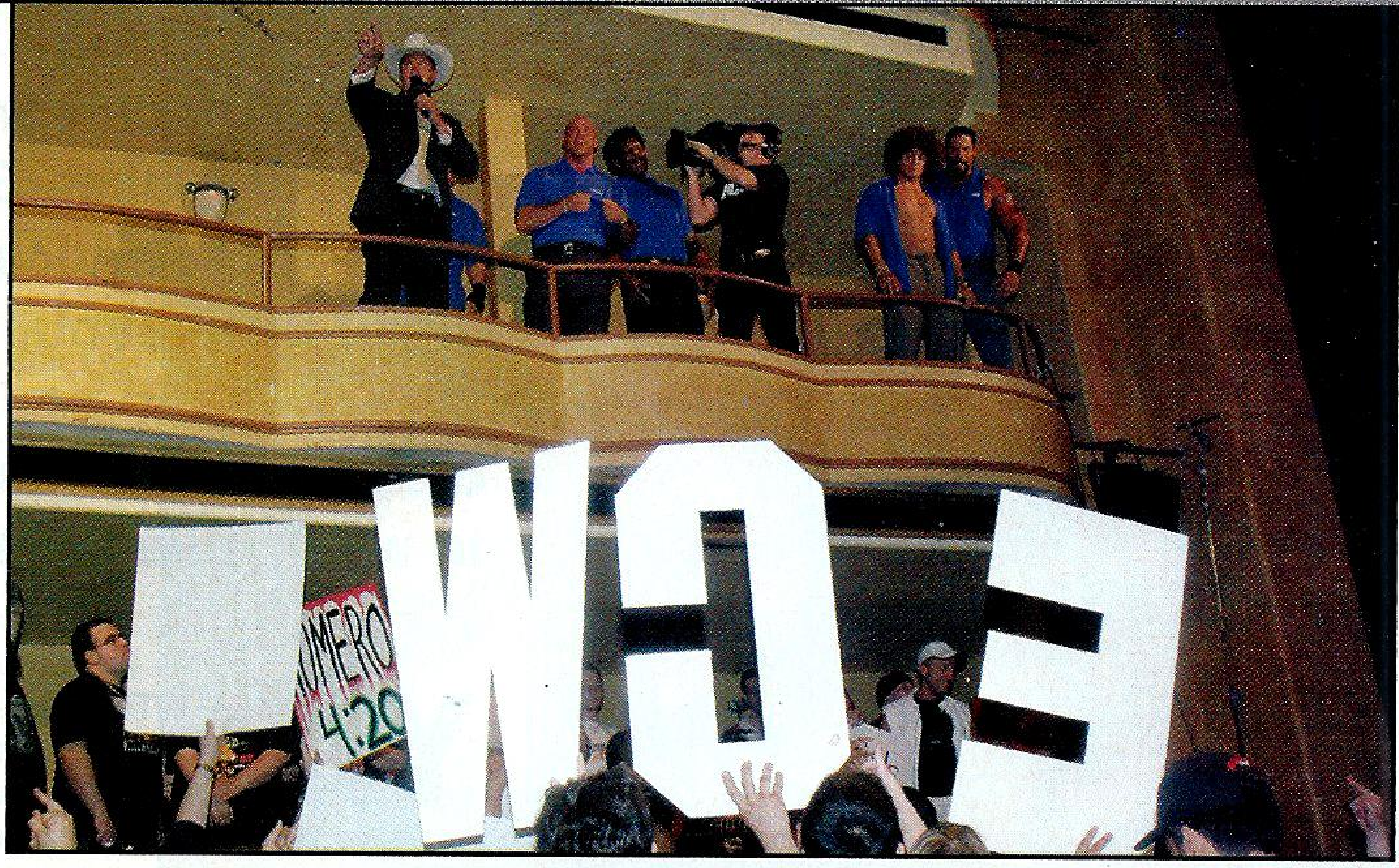
A wrestling organization that combines Paul E.'s creative talent and Vince McMahon's deep pockets is a dream come true for all those ECW fans who were heartbroken when fate lowered the curtain on their favorite promotion six years ago. Now that ECW has the best of all worlds, creating that electric ECW feeling that changed the industry forever in the '90s is much more likely than not today.

Dave Lenker is a contributing editor for The Wrestler.

counterpoint:

AS A PART OF WWE, ECW JUST ISN'T ECW

By Frank Krewda



Senior Writer Frank Krewda maintains that ECW will never be the same as the original, mainly because of the loss of the critical "underdog status," which made the promotion successful during its initial run.

CONSIDERING HOW gracious ECW, as a promotion, was to me when I was a novice reporter cutting my teeth almost a decade ago, you can bet nobody was as pumped as I was when I heard ECW was getting the band back together.

The only rain on my parade: It was going to happen under WWE auspices. Let's face it; having WWE run ECW is like having King George put on the American Revolution.

I agree that all the former ECW superstars will have little difficulty pulling up the effort, daring maneuvers, and passionate performances that made them genuine wrestling trendsetters. And I, too, have no doubt that Paul E. is older, wiser, and probably still as creative as ever. But we can't ignore the major ingredient that will be missing this time around. That critical element is underdog status.

I don't know if it can be quantified, but I'll try. At least 75 percent of ECW's motivation and appeal in the late-'90s (the company's heyday, in my opinion) was the desire to stick it to their wealthier, national counterparts, the WWF and WCW.

I've always felt the entire point of ECW was to prove to wrestling fans that you didn't need a national show, massive payroll, Hollywood-worthy production values, or inane vignettes to put on high-intensity, high-quality wrestling shows. All that was required was a dedicated roster of performers who were willing to shed their blood, sweat, and tears for the fans that supported them.

Fortunately, for those of us who were lucky enough to experience ECW in its prime, Heyman attracted enough superstars who were willing to pay the price.

More importantly, he was able to replace the superstars who left ECW for more money, easier schedules, etc. Why? Because the ECW product was different than what the prime time organizations were putting out. It was special. The fans rooted for the promotion, not just for their favorite wrestlers or most scantily clad women.

Now that the ECW fans know they'll be watching a WWE product, not a genuine ECW creation, I can only hope they'll be able to rekindle the same enthusiasm without a rooting interest. If not, this version of ECW will be a far cry from the promotion we all appreciated in the late-'90s.

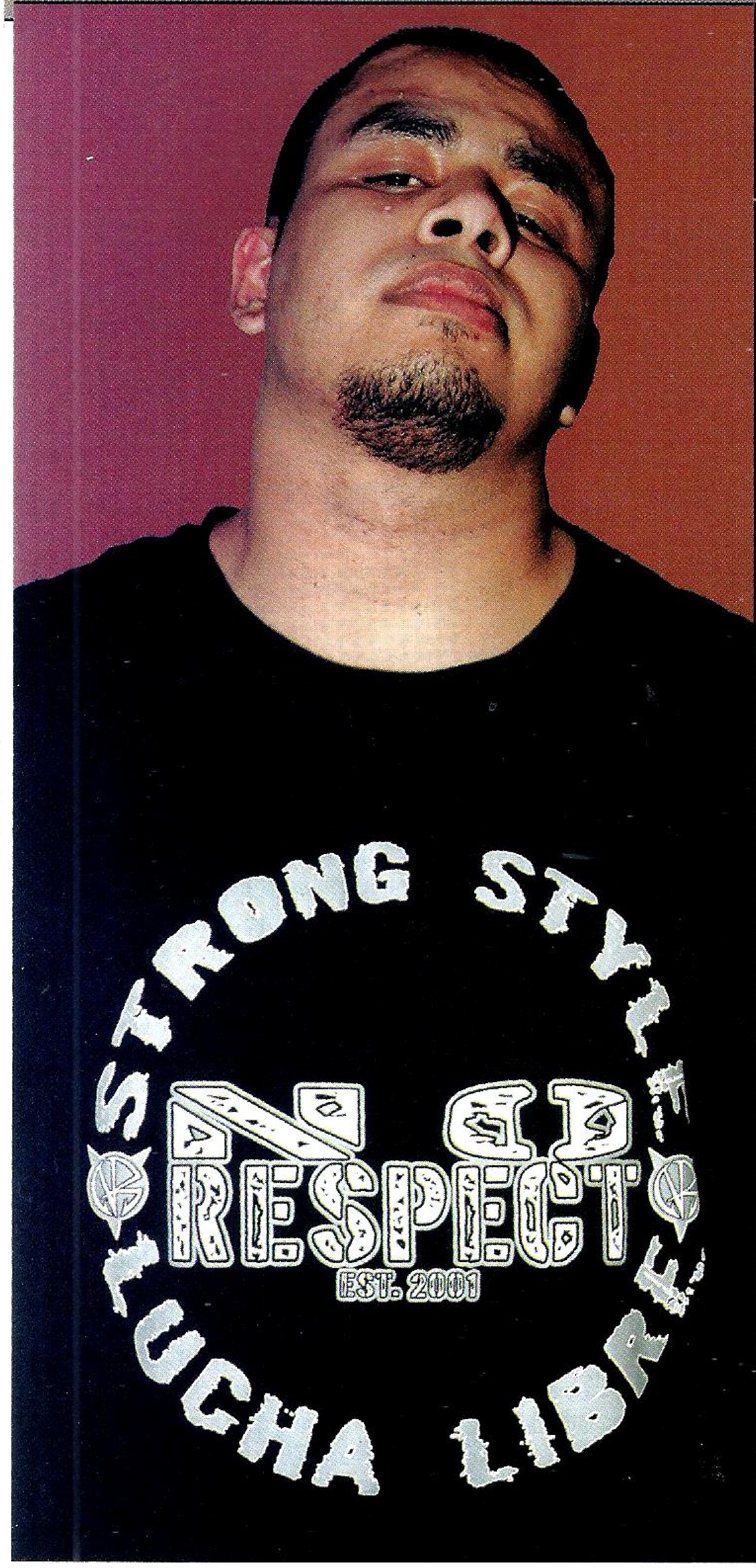
Another threat to fan acceptance will be the manner in which WWE executes this venture. Will it parade ECW's former stars with all the piss, vinegar, and defiance they displayed back in the day when it was genuine? Let's hope not. ECW fans are loud and crude, but they are a savvy bunch. Odds are they see through the sham, realize the "hardcore" attitude these folks are wearing on their sleeves rings hollow, and regard the whole thing as just another Vince McMahon folly. It won't be ECW, and we'll know it.

Frank Krewda is a senior writer for THE WRESTLER.

introducing:

By Dan Murphy

JOKER



There's nothing funny about the life and career of the man known as Joker. Back from 18 months of service in Iraq, Joker is a devout student of the sport and possesses the discipline to know what it takes to win inside the squared circle

YOU MIGHT THINK a guy by the name Joker would—well—be a bit of a clown. But try clowning around with CZW's Joker, and you'll probably end up on the receiving end of a rib-cracking flying stomp.

He may wear face paint reminiscent of Batman's archnemesis, but instead of spending his spare time watching cartoons, this Joker is watching videotapes from the notoriously stiff-styled New Japan Pro Wrestling. And his dedication to studying the sweet science of inflicting maximum punishment has paid off in the form of the Combat Zone Wrestling tag team title, which he holds with partner Eddie Kingston.

Joker first discovered pro wrestling in the late-1990s, getting turned on to the sport by watching ECW and "Stone Cold" Steve Austin in the WWF. At the age of 15, he began training at a local wrestling gym. "I lied about my age and told the owner I was 16," Joker said. "I was a young kid. I didn't know if I could make it or not, but I had to try."

He made his CZW debut September 2003, competing in a students' match that also involved Cory Kastle, Krystian Wolfe, and Sabian. But, in just one match, Joker went from being an unknown student to being one of the most talked-about up-and-coming wrestlers in the region.

At CZW's big Cage of Death V event, Joker faced Chris Cash in a ladder match on the undercard. The match ended up being the show-stealer and left fans—both in attendance and online—buzzing. "That was actually supposed to be a four-way ladder match, but the other two guys got stuck in traffic," Joker said. "We went out there with just one intention—to make it the match of the night. We wanted to give the fans everything they wanted. I didn't

Joker (executing a sunset flip on Christopher Bishop) has worked at coupling his stiff, New Japan-influenced ring style with high-impact aerial assaults. His passion for wrestling was rekindled by his peers following his stint in Iraq with the Army National Guard.

realize the importance of the match until maybe months later."

The importance of the match and Joker's victory was that he began to climb up the ranks, moving into high-profile matches and earning shots at Jimmy Rave's Iron Man title. But just as his star really started to rise, he did the unexpected.

He went to war. Literally.

Joker enlisted in the U.S. Army National Guard. He completed basic training and was sent for an 18-month deployment to Iraq.

While basic training and wrestling training are both extremely grueling and physical, Joker said there's really no comparison between the two.

"The military is just a different animal," Joker said. "They break you down and then rebuild you again. They just tear you to pieces and start over. Wrestling can get frustrating, especially if you're not humble and want everything right away. Wrestling is a process. It takes patience."

While in Iraq, Joker said he lost a lot of his passion for wrestling. If not for friends like Kingston and Sabian, Joker says he may have not have returned to wrestling when he came back to the U.S. However, he did return to CZW in November 2005, decked out in military fatigues and attacking H8 Club and Zandig. That led to a grudge match at Cage of Death VII that saw The H8 Club and Zandig defeat Joker, Necro Butcher, and Toby Klein.

Now, Joker is a part of the Blackout faction, along with Kingston, Sabian, and Ruckus—a group that's just as close outside of the ring as they are inside of it. On February 11, 2006, he and Kingston defeated the team of Chris Hero and Claudio Castagnoli to win the CZW tag team title. Joker compares Blackout to another famous stable, The Four Horsemen, and he sees himself as the Arn Anderson-style "enforcer" of the group.

On June 10, Blackout became even more like the Horsemen, turning heel, destroying Zandig, and cutting his hair in mid-ring.

Joker describes his ring technique as straightforward, strong style brawling, with a high-risk aerial flair. "Kingston's style is old-fashioned All Japan, and mine is old-fashioned New Japan," Joker said. His Joker driver has been an extremely effective finisher, especially when it's set up with his patented double-leg stomp off the top rope or his notoriously stiff clotheslines.

"I do like the smash-mouth style and to hit guys hard, and I appreciate it when I get the same thing right back," Joker said.

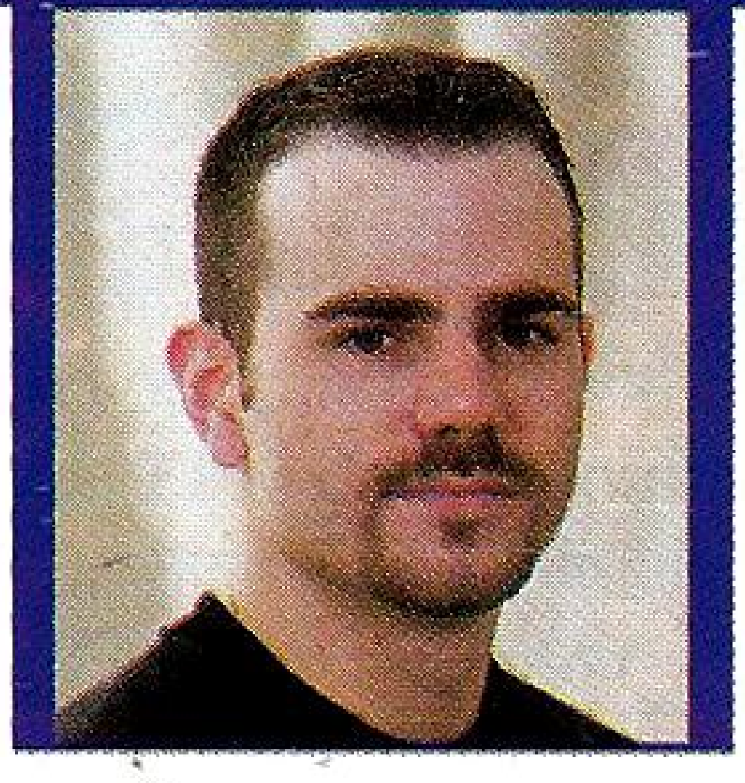
It may seem a little incongruous for a wrestler as serious, intense, and stiff as Joker to paint his face up in a clown's grease paint, but Joker says it just brings out another aspect of his own personality. "The face paint is just something I can't do without. I feel naked without it," he said. "It just brings out another side of me."

That's very good for Joker and his Blackout teammates, but the leering face paint certainly doesn't bring any smiles to his opponents' faces. ☐

from bell to bell

By Mike Quackenbush

[Editor's note: Mike Quackenbush, who has held numerous titles in the United States and beyond, files reports on the life on an independent wrestler seeking to make an impact on the business. In the conclusion of a two-part report, he illustrates how the road to recovery doesn't simply end after the final bell.]



Mike Quackenbush's return to the ring led to subsequent further extensive pain and pending additional surgery, but during that match in Essen, Germany, pure adrenaline fueled the determined warrior. It wasn't until after the match that he felt the full extent of the pain.

THE FIRST FEW strands of a familiar song echoed off the walls of the TuRock in Essen, Germany. There were hundreds of people in the building that evening, but less than a handful knew that I was also in attendance. From a dark vantage, I peered through a side door as the reigning Westside Xtreme Wrestling champion Ares turned his back and faced the wrestler's entrance, looking to see who was about to enter. I pushed through the fans, seeing that Ares' attention was elsewhere, and stood once again in the squared circle that had defined so much of my life over the last 15 years. The fans seemed confused, seeing this cloaked, hooded character in place just behind the champion's back. It must have seemed somewhat incongruous to them for a moment.

To me, however, it was a moment of truth. I hadn't set foot in a ring in three months, and while I had a lot of pent-up energy, I was far from being in the best shape of my career. It had been only 10 weeks since the surgery to remove cysts from my back, wrists, and right foot, and, at that moment, disguised before the raucous crowd in Essen, I became almost panic-stricken. I wondered how quickly I would tire out. I wondered how much it would hurt to once again be hurled to the canvas. I wondered if coming back this quickly was the wisest of moves. I knew it probably was not.

Despite the consequences of an premature return, Quackenbush cherished every moment spent in the TuRock, which led to his wXw German heavyweight title win. A visibly humbled champion thanks the crowd that had so vociferously supported him.

The time for such musings was at an end. I crouched down low, gathered up the ends of the cloak in my hands, and then stood up and flung it off into the crowd. The ring attire was new, but my face they knew instantly. A cacophony of sound rained in as the realization of the hooded figure's real identity alighted on the fans in attendance. I had not forgotten them; they had not forgotten me. What I lacked in conditioning, I made up for in pure adrenaline. The electricity in the room shook me to new life, and, as Ares made the slow, gradual turn to see what had caused such an uproar from the German fans, he swiveled just in time to meet my right forearm.

From there, most of the match plays like a blur in my mind. I remember the sounds of the people in attendance, their vociferous, passionate support. It was the kind of thing some wrestlers dream about, but never find. I was lucky to experience it just once. I tried my best to spare my back any undue punishment, but that was a naive thought. Eventually, it came. A bodyslam. A backbreaker. A power bomb. A Boston crab. It wasn't as if my Achilles heel was a matter of mystery; my surgeries were well-known in wrestling circles. Often times, in the course of a match, it is possible to endure incredible amounts of pain—while adrenaline is flowing. Once the adrenaline wears off—later that night, back at the hotel, and the following morning—well, then it's an entirely different story, I assure you. If I thought the pain of being bent in half in a crab was particularly agonizing in the middle of the ring, I'd only have to wait until later that evening to find out just how little my back appreciated the abuse.

On March 18, I not only marked my return to the ring, I not only marked the passing of my 30th birthday, but I also became the wXw German heavyweight champion. On that evening in Essen, having escaped from all of Ares' signature holds, I used my own Quackendriver 2 to plant my Swiss foe firmly on top of his head and hold his shoulders to the mat for a count of three. At the TuRock, there is no retaining barrier between the audience and the ring, and with fans pressed up against the apron on every side, pounding on the mat and chanting at the top of their lungs, I let out a long sigh of relief. The moment, the match, the championship belt—they all belonged to me.

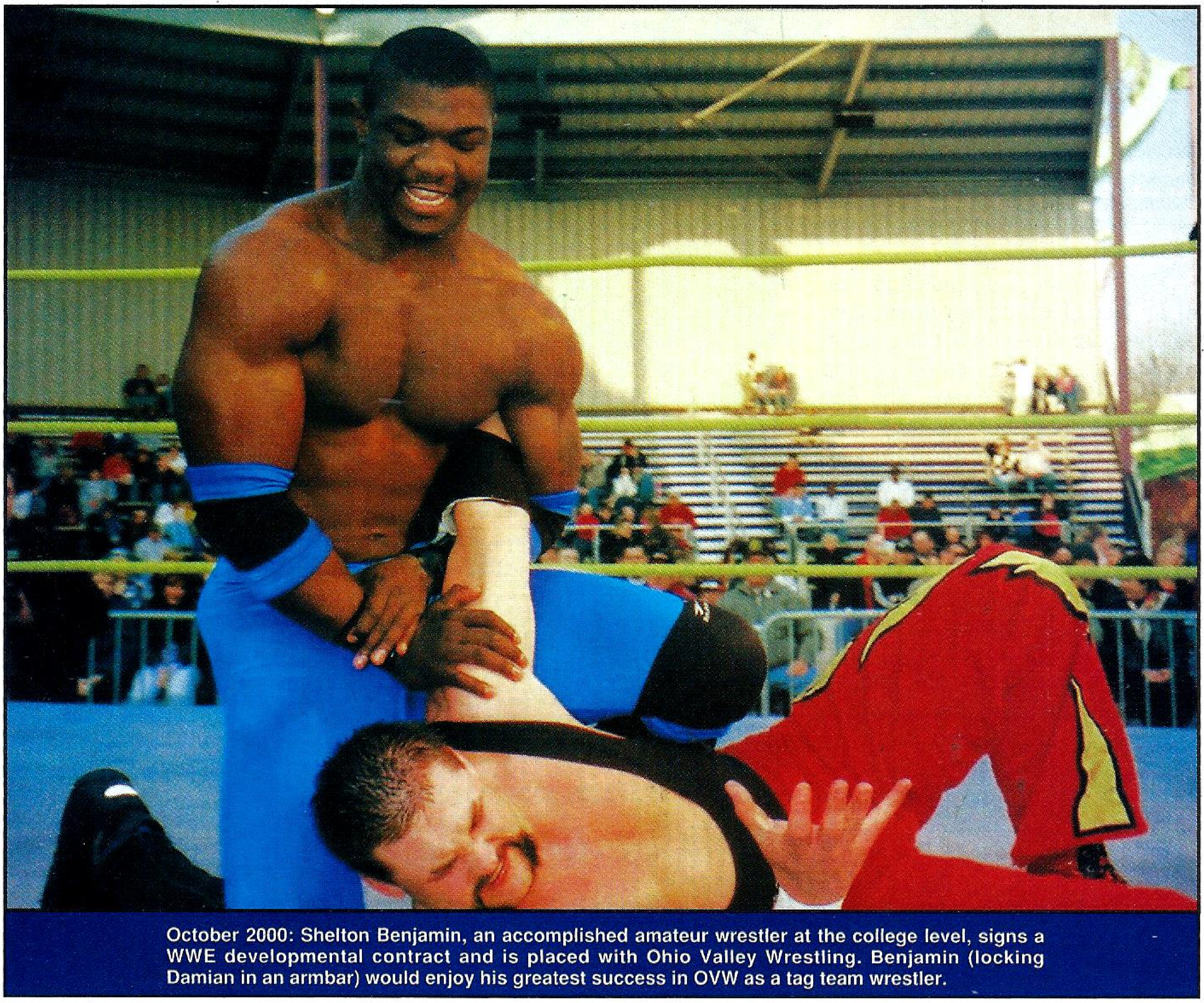
Four hours later, back in my sparsely decorated hotel room, I hardly felt like a hero. The scars left by the recent surgeries were bright red and purple, and they ached like the stitches had just been snipped. It was painful to do much of anything other than lay face down on the rather rigid bed at the Etap Hotel. In the morning, my plan was to hop on the Euro-Rail and take the train to Austria for a week of sightseeing. I had left some room in my travel bags in case I would end up bringing back some choice souvenirs. It's a good thing I saved some space ... the first souvenir acquired on the trip was an eight-pound novelty made of leather and metal.

Now, I am five months removed from my comeback match, and I am looking at having an additional operation, due in some part to my hasty return to the ring. The few matches I wrestled in March, April, and May didn't help the healing process much at all. My doctors in particular seem baffled by it all. They examine my back, and ask me what I've been up to. I answer with the same story I've just told you. They shake their heads and half-laugh through their noses. "I can't imagine it was worth it," one says in a condescending tone, as he leaves my company. I'd never suppose he'd see the value in it. There are some things only a wrestler truly understands. □

Spotlight On...

Shelton Benjamin

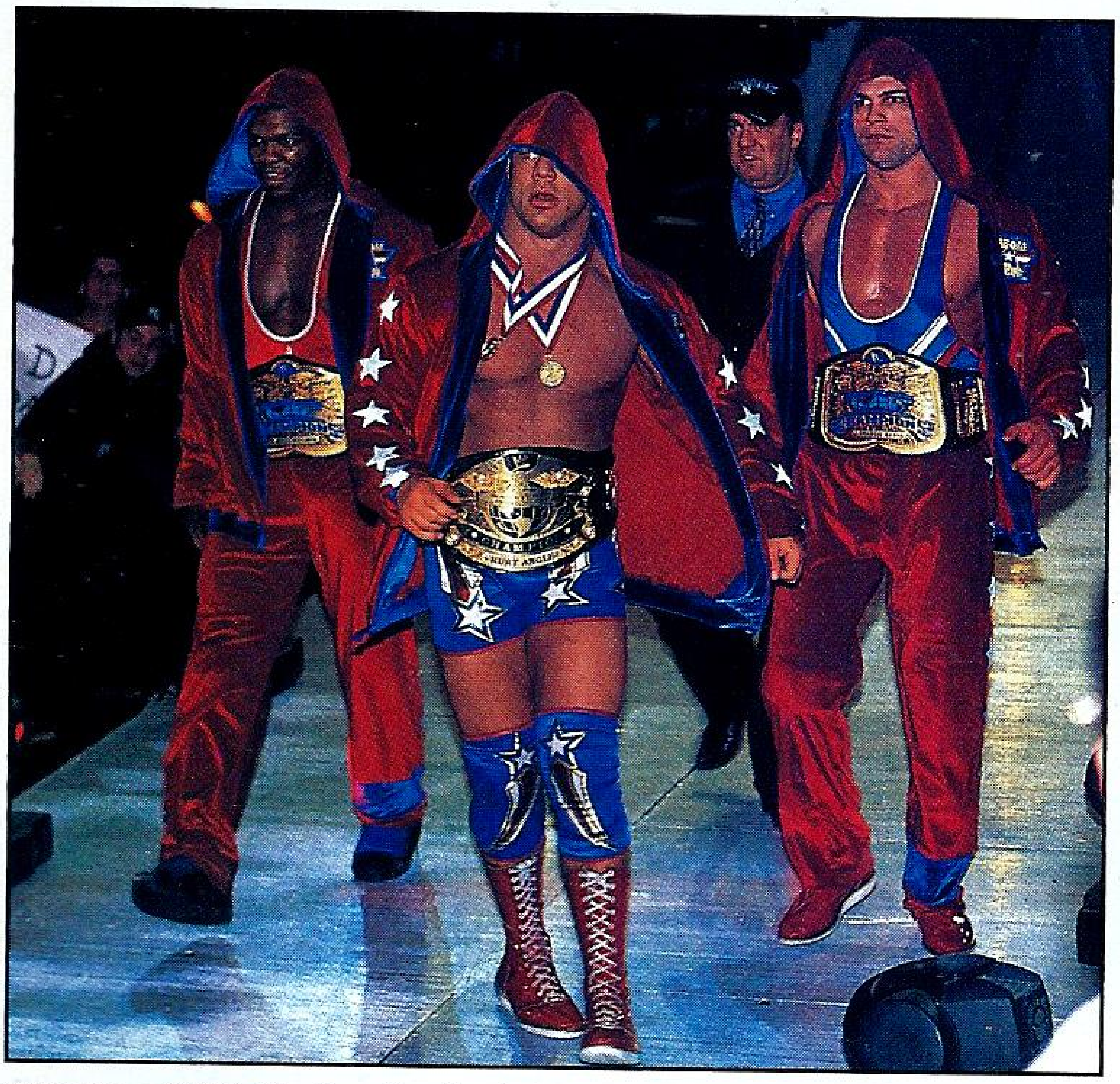
SOMETIMES A VISIT from Mama can make everything better ... Shelton Benjamin has developed into one of Raw's top superstars since Mama Benjamin came to visit, and, now that she's gone, Benjamin is well into his third reign as Intercontinental champion ... Entered the pro wrestling world with some very impressive amateur credentials, going 122-10 in his high school career and winning South Carolina State championships in 1993 and 1994 ... Won a junior college national championship and was recruited by the University of Minnesota, where he posted an impressive 36-6 collegiate record ... Was a collegiate teammate of Brock Lesnar ... Benjamin signed a WWE developmental contract in 2000 and was assigned to Ohio Valley Wrestling ... Formed a tag team in OVW with Lesnar called The Minnesota Stretching Crew ... In February 2001, Lesnar and Benjamin beat The Disciples of Synn to win the OVW Southern tag title ... Lost the belts back to the Disciples in April but regained them in a dark match at a *Smackdown* taping in May that had WWE fans wanting to know more about that exciting OVW team ... Benjamin suffered an injury, forcing



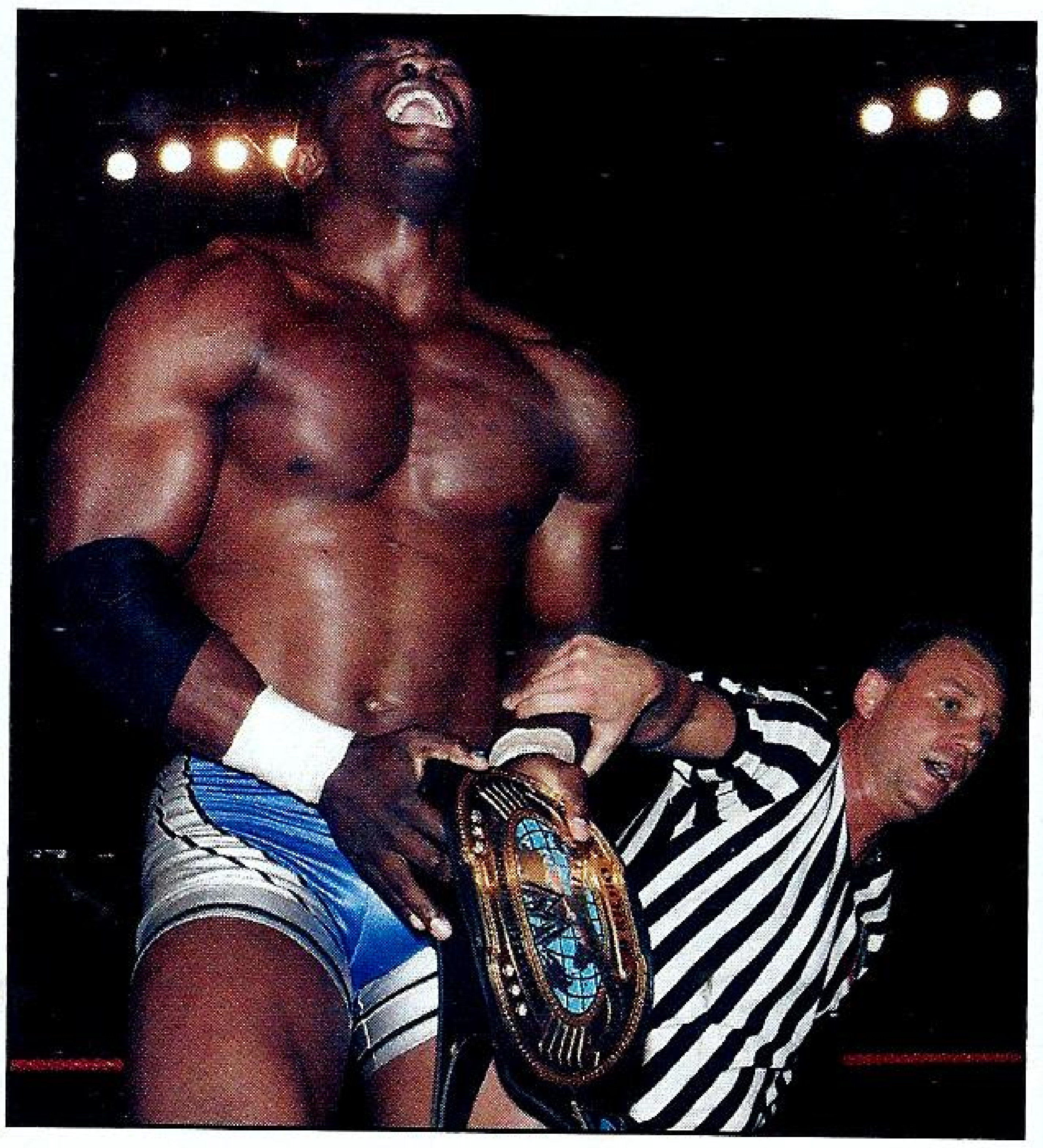
October 2000: Shelton Benjamin, an accomplished amateur wrestler at the college level, signs a WWE developmental contract and is placed with Ohio Valley Wrestling. Benjamin (locking Damian in an armbar) would enjoy his greatest success in OVW as a tag team wrestler.

July 2002: Benjamin wins the OVW Southern tag team title with Redd Dogg (Rodney Mack). Benjamin, who also won the straps with Brock Lesnar, would use this title reign to catapult himself onto the WWE roster.

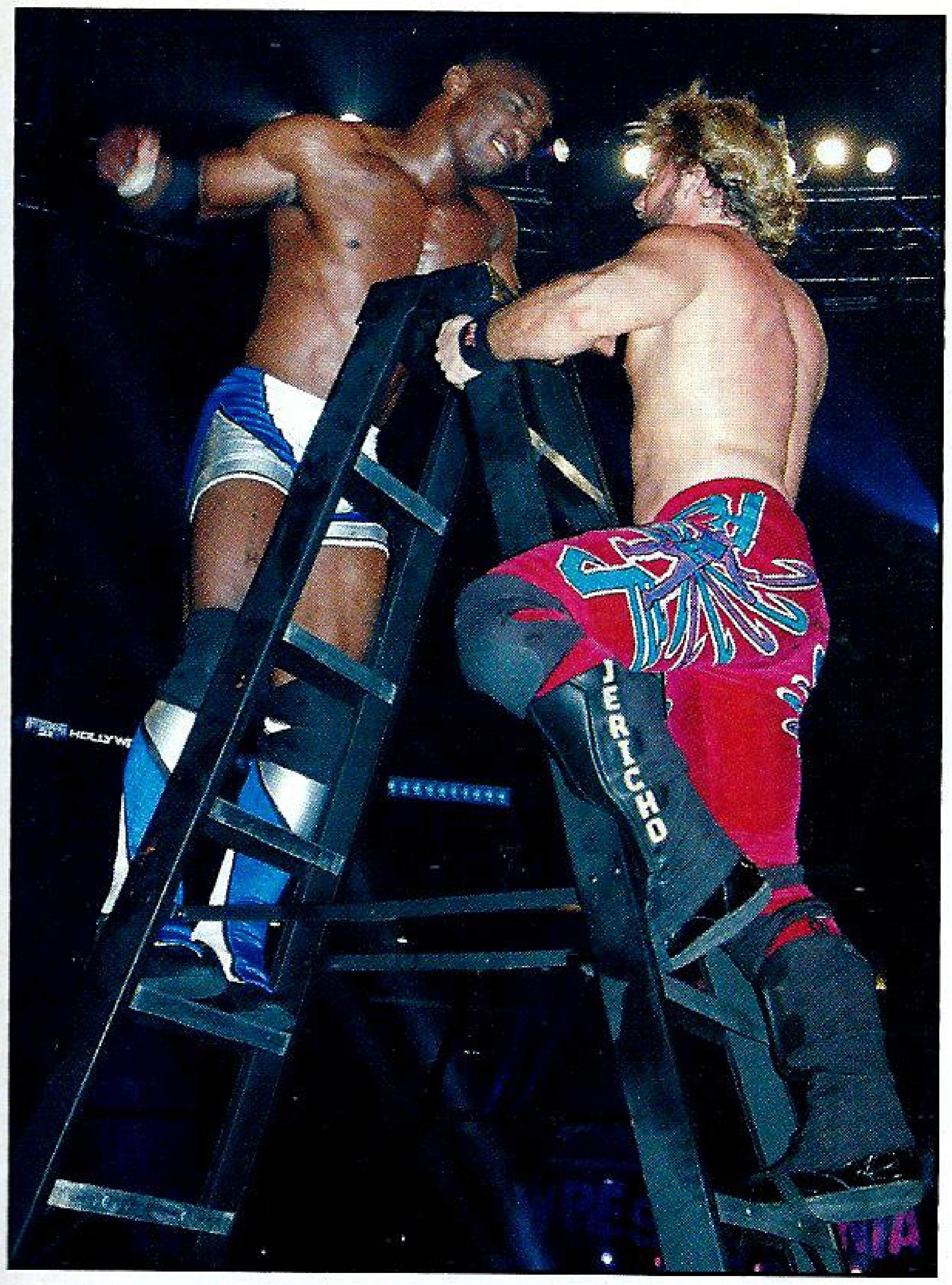
the Stretching Crew to forfeit the belts ... Returned a few months later, and he and Lesnar regained the belts in October 2001, beating Rico Constantino and The Prototype (John Cena) ... When Lesnar was called up to WWE, Benjamin began teaming with Redd Dogg (Rodney Mack) as The Dogg Pound ... Benjamin and Dogg beat Flash and Trash to win the OVW Southern tag belts ... After some impressive appearances on *Heat*, Benjamin was offered a WWE contract but was conflicted about abandoning Dogg, as Lesnar had abandoned him ... In September 2002, Dogg made Benjamin's decision easier, turning against his partner ... Dogg beat Benjamin to take ownership of the title, and Benjamin jumped to WWE ... Assigned to the Smackdown brand, Benjamin joined forces with Charlie Haas as part of Team Angle ... In January 2003, Benjamin had extremely impressive singles matches against Chris Benoit and Edge. Though he lost both matches, he established himself as a legitimate title contender ... In February 2003, Team Angle defeated Eddie and Chavo Guerrero to win the Smackdown World tag team title ... Team Angle suffered a humbling loss at No Way Out, as Haas, Benjamin, and Angle lost a handicap match to Lesnar and Benoit ... Benjamin and Haas retained the belts at WrestleMania XIX, beating Los Guerreros and Benoit and Rhyno in a three-way match ... Team Angle's title reign came to an end at the hands of an unlikely team, as they lost the title to Eddie Guerrero and Tajiri at Judgment Day ... Angle was furious about the loss and fired Benjamin and Haas from Team Angle ... They then



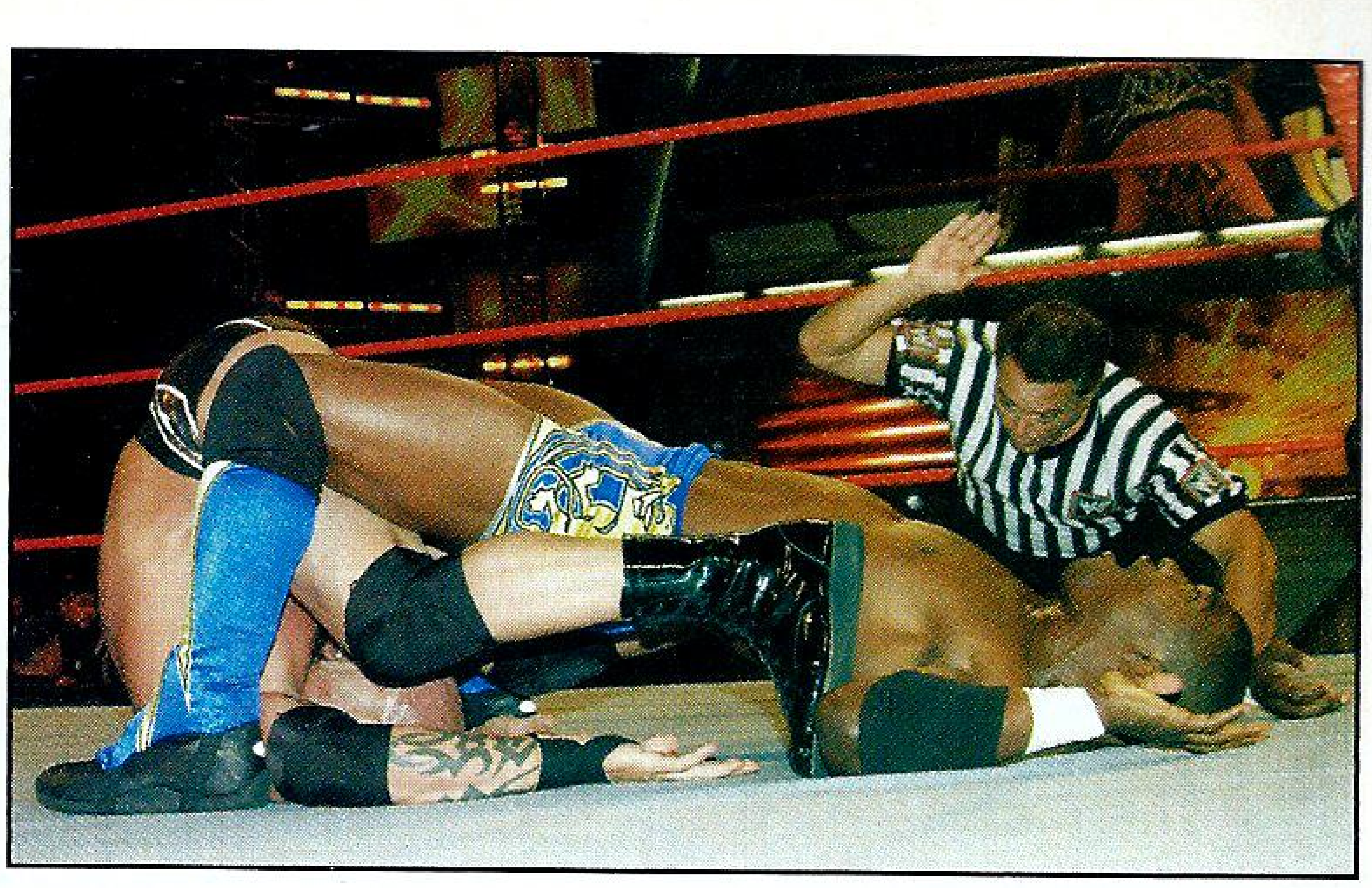
December 2002: Shelton Benjamin is paired with Charlie Haas as part of Team Angle. The tandem would go on to hold the Smackdown tag team championship on two occasions as well as be named *PWI* Tag Team of the Year.



October 2004: The pinnacle of Benjamin's young career comes at Taboo Tuesday, where the athletic grappler receives the majority of the fans' on-line votes to become the challenger in an Intercontinental title match with Chris Jericho. Benjamin is victorious and begins the first of his three Intercontinental title reigns.



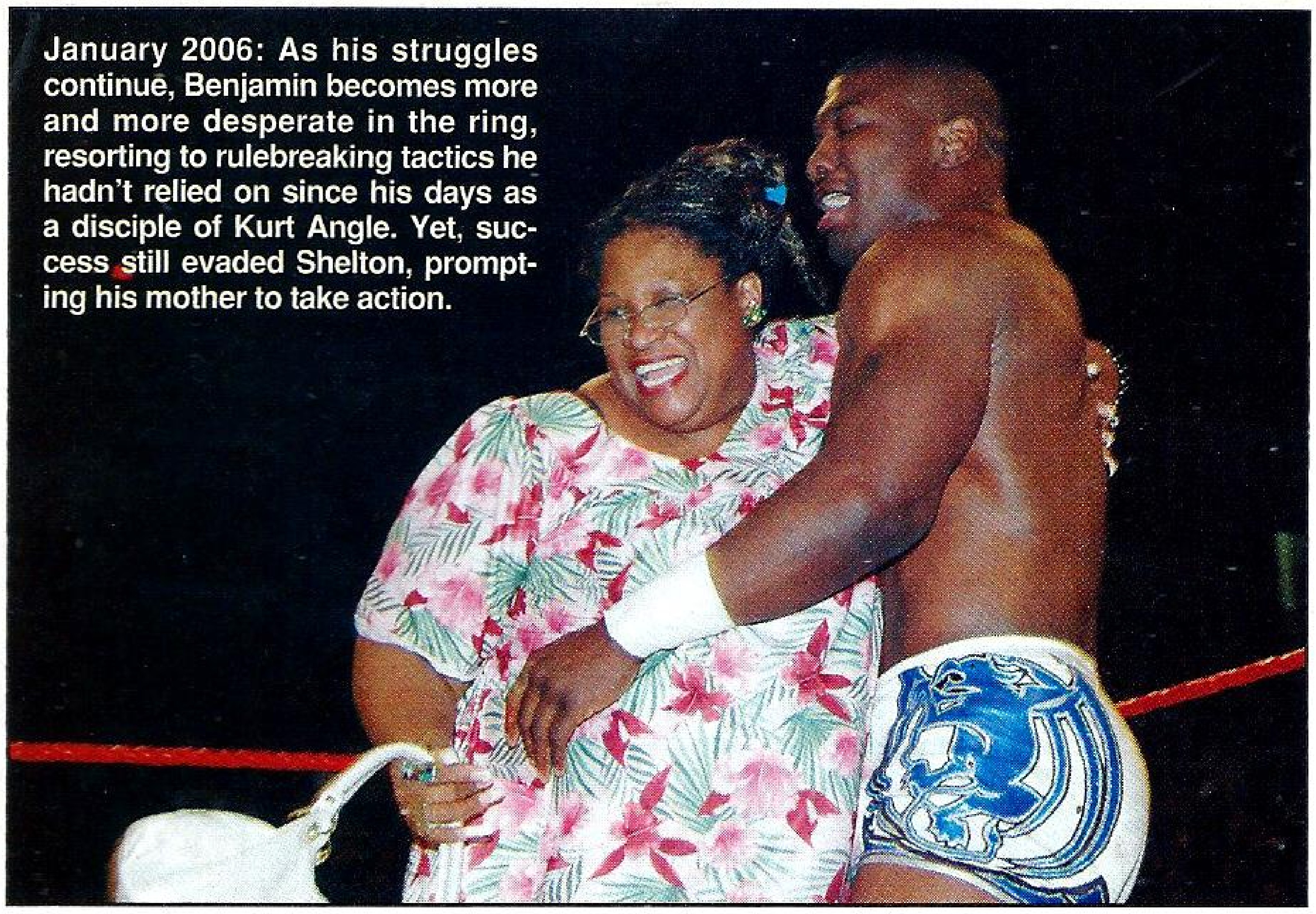
April 2005: Benjamin is the talk of WWE following his masterful performance in the first "Money-In-The-Bank" ladder match, at WrestleMania 21. The former tag team champion seemed to do everything in the match—with the exception of securing the coveted briefcase, which went to Edge.



October 2005: In a matter of months, Benjamin goes from Intercontinental champion to mid-card performer on *Heat*. Rumors circulate that Benjamin would soon be released from WWE.

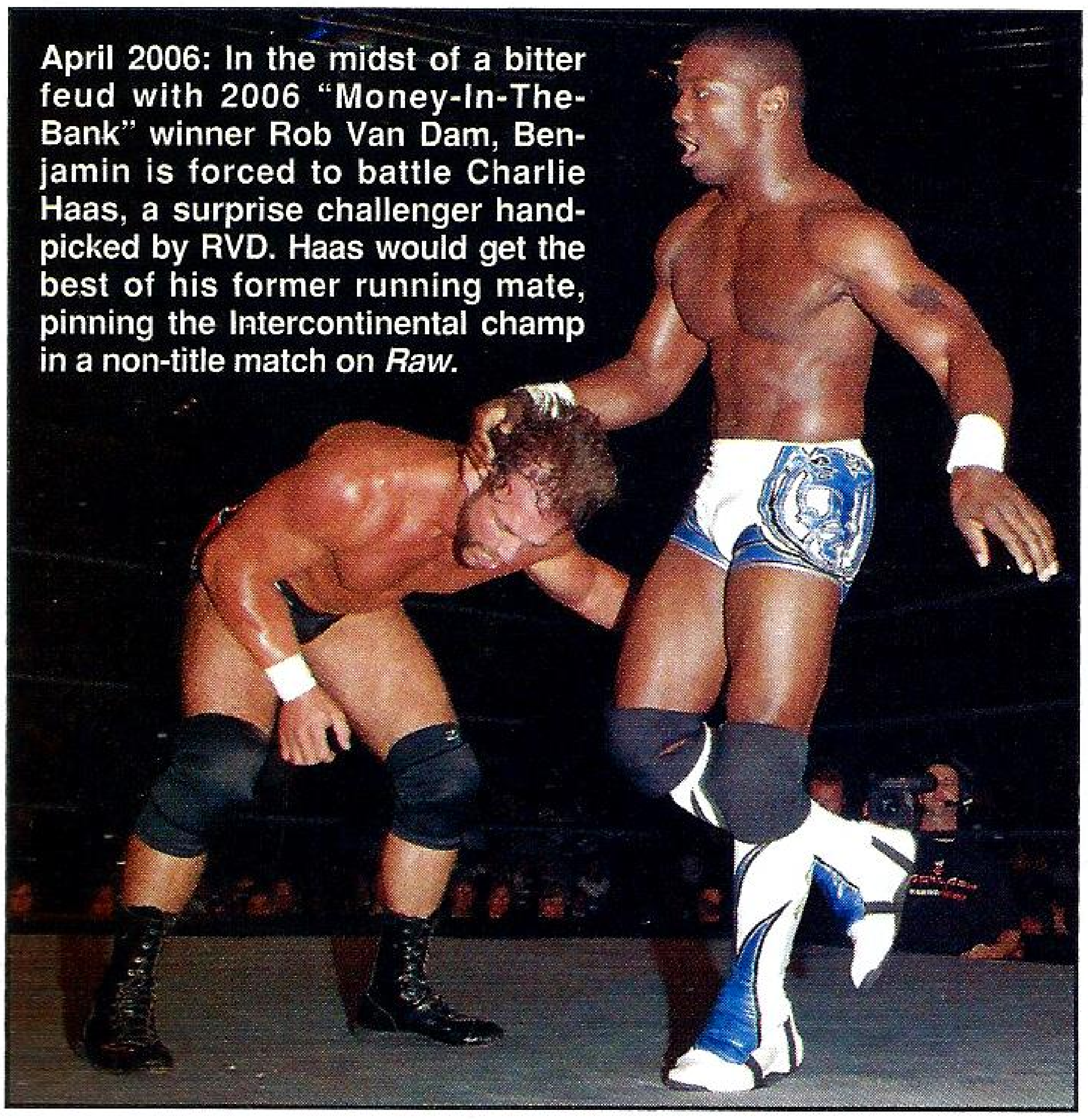
christened themselves "The World's Greatest Tag Team" ... In June 2003, TWGTT and The Big Show teamed up to beat a veritable dream team in Lesnar, Angle, and Mr. America (Hulk Hogan) on *Smackdown* ... In July 2003, TWGTT regained the belts with a win over Eddie and Tajiri ... They lost the belts to the Guerreros in September, and Benjamin suffered a knee injury, keeping him out of action for several weeks ... Haas and Benjamin were named Tag Team of the Year by readers of *PWI*, but the team's best days were already behind them ... In March 2004, Benjamin was selected by Raw in the draft lottery ... Scored the biggest singles win of his career on March 29, 2004, upsetting Triple-H in the main event on *Raw* ... The following week, again beat "The Game," this time by countout ... Pinned Ric Flair at Backlash 2004 ... Continued his war against Evolution throughout the spring and early-summer ... Suffered a broken hand in a match against Garrison Cade in June 2004, putting him out of action for two months ... Beat Christian, Hurricane, Tajiri, Rhyno, and Jonathan Coachman in a six-way match on an October 2004 *Raw* ... The next night, earned 37 percent of the fan vote at Taboo Tuesday to earn an Intercontinental title shot against Chris Jericho ... Made the most of the opportunity, winning the title ... Retained the I-C title with a win over Christian at the Survivor Series ... Humiliated Maven at New Year's Revolution, beating him in two straight falls in a one-sided match ... Stole the show in the "Money-In-The-Bank" ladder match at WrestleMania 21, but Edge managed to secure the briefcase containing the contract for a guaranteed title shot ... Successfully defended the I-C title with a win over Jericho at Backlash 2005 ... Faced Shawn Michaels the following night in a "Gold Rush Tournament" match on *Raw* ... In a Match of the Year contender, Michaels pinned Benjamin after nailing the "Sweet Chin Music" as Benjamin springboarded off the top rope ... Feuded with Muhammad Hassan for several weeks ... In June 2005, Carlito Caribbean Cool was sent to Raw courtesy of the draft lottery and walked into a I-C title match against Benjamin ... Carlito pulled off

June 2005: After dropping the Intercontinental title to Carlito Caribbean Cool, who was a surprise draft pick by Raw, the summer is not kind to Benjamin. Benjamin's struggles would continue leading him further out of title contention as the year progressed.

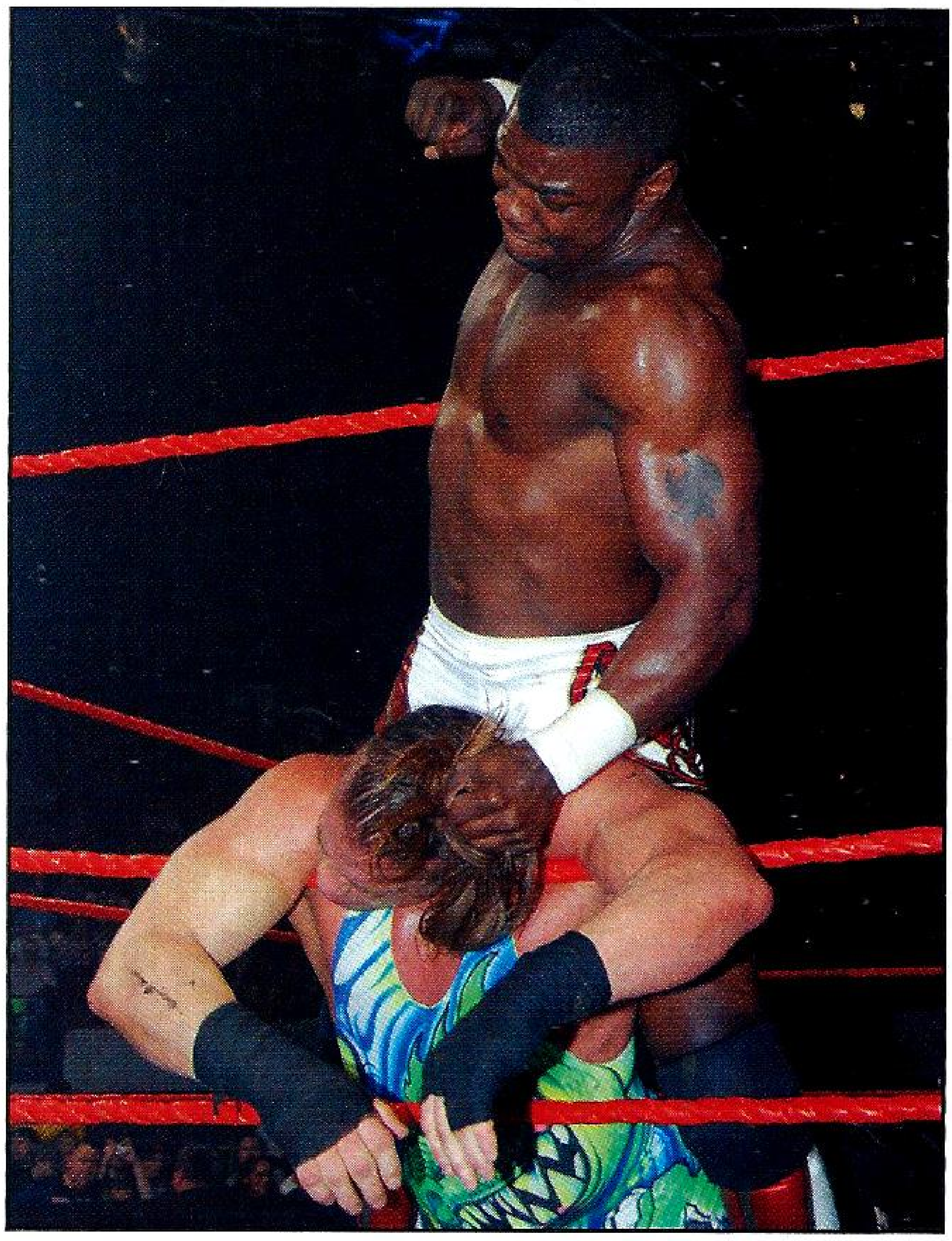


January 2006: As his struggles continue, Benjamin becomes more and more desperate in the ring, resorting to rulebreaking tactics he hadn't relied on since his days as a disciple of Kurt Angle. Yet, success still evaded Shelton, prompting his mother to take action.

the upset against the unprepared Benjamin, taking the title ... Benjamin fell into a slump in the summer of 2005, losing several matches to Carlito, Chris Masters, and Kerwin White (Chavo Guerrero Jr.) ... Rebounded with a win over White at Unforgiven, but lost to White in a rematch the following week on *Raw* ... In fall of 2005, competed mainly on *Heat* (against preliminary talent), and rumors circulated that he would be released by WWE ... Benjamin's frustration became apparent after he and Michaels lost a tag match to Carlito and Angle on *Raw* and an angry Benjamin shoved Michaels after the match ... In January 2006, Benjamin lost to Masters on *Raw*, prompting his mother to come out and chastise her son for his losing ways ... Benjamin's mom began accompanying him to the ring for his matches, and she proved to be just the slumpbuster he needed ... Beat Viscera at New Year's Revolution after hitting "Big Vis" with Mom's purse ... In February, Shelton's mom suffered an apparent heart attack after being yelled at by The Big Show, and her medical condition left her confined to a wheelchair ... Exploited his mother's condition, hitting Flair with her oxygen tank to regain the Intercontinental title ... Mama jumped from her wheelchair and did a jig of joy after the match ... She vanished from WWE a short time later ... Benjamin again proved to be the star of the "MITB" match at WM 22, but RVD won the bout ... Lost a non-title match to former partner Haas, who was Van Dam's handpicked opponent for Benjamin, on an April edition of *Raw* ... Van Dam beat Benjamin to win the I-C title at Backlash ... On a May edition of *Raw*, Benjamin teamed with Triple-H and Masters against John Cena and RVD in a "Texas Tornado Handicap" match ... "The Game" leveled both RVD and Cena with pedigrees, but Benjamin managed to cover Van Dam, allowing him to regain the Intercontinental title. ☐



April 2006: In the midst of a bitter feud with 2006 "Money-In-The-Bank" winner Rob Van Dam, Benjamin is forced to battle Charlie Haas, a surprise challenger handpicked by RVD. Haas would get the best of his former running mate, pinning the Intercontinental champ in a non-title match on *Raw*.



May 2006: Benjamin regains the Intercontinental title from Van Dam as part of a six-man "Texas Tornado" match after dropping the strap to "Mr. Monday Night" a mere two weeks earlier. Both the Raw World and Intercontinental titles were on the line during the match, with Benjamin pinning RVD to take back the I-C belt.

Q&A

Harley Race

"The Wrestling Business Has Given Me Everything I've Ever Had"

HE WAS THE last of the rugged champions. Whenever pro wrestling historians look back at the decade of the 1970s, the National Wrestling Alliance will be remembered for its quartet of outstanding world champions: Dory Funk Jr., Jack Brisco, Terry Funk, and Harley Race. These men were experts in on-the-mat grappling, but were just as likely to throw a dropkick or a punch. Race, Brisco, and the Funks were outstanding champions because they could have excellent matches with any wrestler, anywhere in the world.

Harley Race knows all about the challenges and rigors of battling the greatest wrestlers on the planet. The epitome of the traveling world champion, Race probably logged more miles than any titleholder in history. From sunny Tampa to frigid Calgary, from Toronto to Tokyo, Race was recognized as the world's greatest wrestler during his eight NWA title reigns between 1973 and 1984. Among peers such as Ric Flair and Hulk Hogan, Race is considered one of the very best of all-time.

Just the name "Harley Race" connotes a certain era, when the arenas were smoky, the broads were tough, a legit punch in the face kept a challenger in check, and St. Louis was the center of the wrestling world. But Race was not a throwback. Despite his unrefined physique, Race helped bring the pro wrestling style into the 1980s, taking to the air more often than his predecessors. The "Harley bump over the top turnbuckle" has become a staple of Triple-H's matches, and Chris Benoit's flying headbutt off the top rope was Race's trademark high spot.

Yet there are dimensions to Race's career other than his NWA title reigns. There is his AWA tag team title reign with Larry Hennig, his seven Missouri State titles, his matches against WWF champion Hulk Hogan, and his behind-the-scenes role as partial owner of the Central States promotion. In the early-1990s, he served as the manager of WCW champions Lex Luger and Big Van Vader. Today, Race operates a respected training school and the Missouri-based World League Wrestling promotion. Sports Publishing LLC released his autobiography, ***King Of The Ring: The Harley Race Story****, in 2004.*

Race talks about all aspects of his career in this exclusive 60-minute interview with Senior Writer Harry Burkett. "Harley Race definitely has the Midwest mentality that actions speak louder than words," noted Burkett. "For that reason, I understand why Harley's word was gold in the wrestling business. In a profession and a society full of self-promoters, it was refreshing to deal with a man who says only what is necessary—and, as a result, he is taken very seriously. After our interview, I understood why the words 'Race' and 'respect' are synonymous in the wrestling industry."

Q: I really appreciate you taking time to do this interview, Mr. Race, because I know you're just returning from a tiring trip. How did you make out today?

A: Actually, I'm doing just fine. I had to leave my home on the Lake of the Ozarks in Missouri this morning, and go to Columbia, which is 60 miles away. I needed to get some injections in my back to help me deal with some pain.

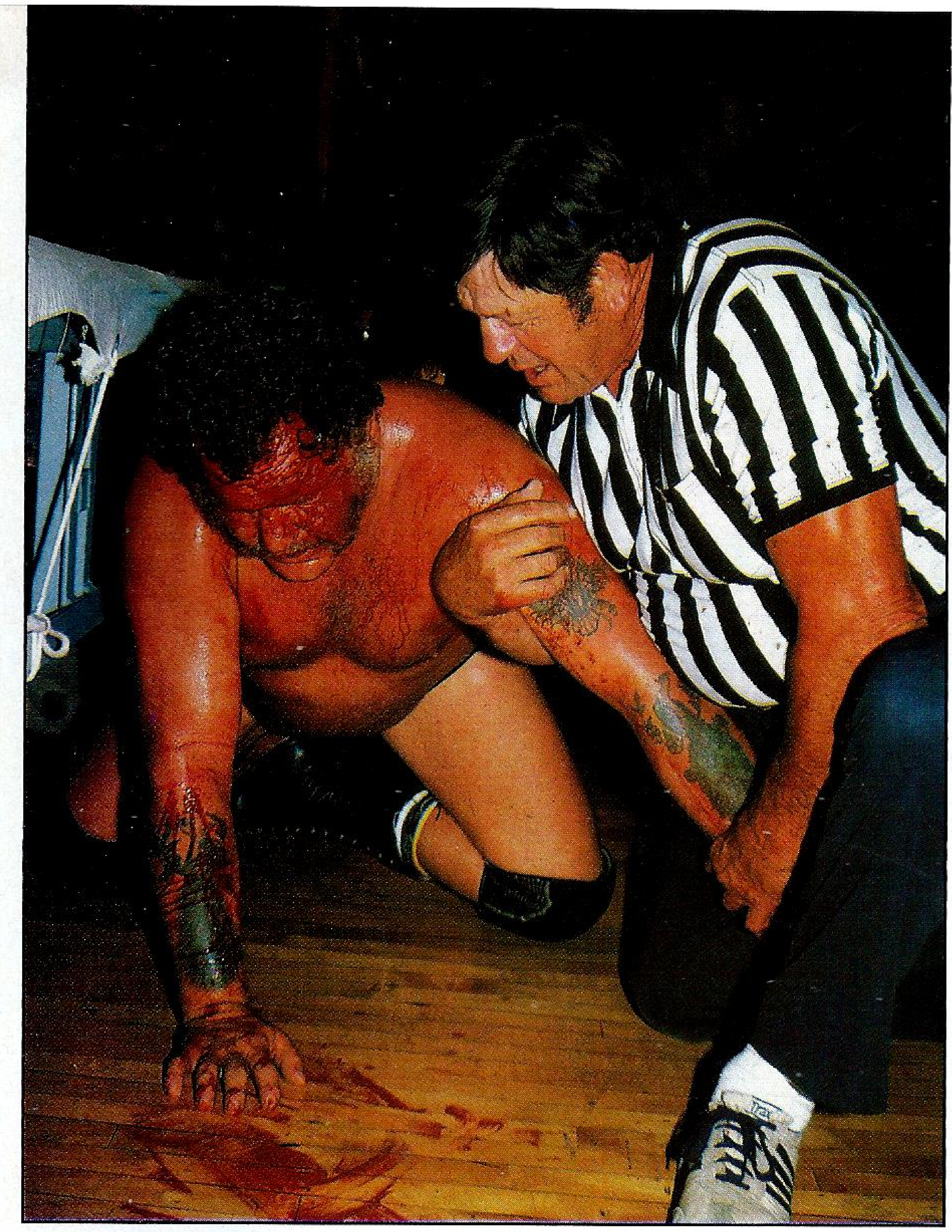
Q: Are your back problems related to your 32 years as an active wrestler?

A: Virtually anything that is wrong with me stems from my years in wrestling.

Q: I don't want to depress you from the outset, but what is the quality of life like for an ex-pro wrestler that has been out of the ring for 15 years?

> **"I never let anybody push me around. Some people tried to do it, and they regretted it afterward."**

JAPAN



In a career that spanned 32 years, Race spilled gallons of blood, broke countless bones, and suffered his fair share of concussions. Fifteen years removed from active competition, he says he'd do it all over again.

A: I have no complaints. If I could do it all over again, and get beat up and deal with the aches and pains, I'd love to do it again. The wrestling business has given me everything I've ever had. You're right, I've been out of the business for 15 years. And considering that I started in the business at the age of 15 and I am now 63 years old, it's no wonder why I'm feeling the effects. But it was all a lot of fun. I wouldn't have changed hardly any of it.

Q: Did you anticipate any of the aches and pains when you were younger?

A: You never, ever think of that at the time. Your mind is set on getting where you want to go, whether that's the next town or the next title. No matter what it takes, you'll do your damndest to get there. But 15 years out, like you say, I often ask, "Oh, my God, what did I do to myself?" But that's just the aches and pains talking.

Q: Do you keep in contact with wrestlers you knew during your active career?

A: With some. This Thursday I'm leaving for the Cauliflower Alley Club annual convention in Las Vegas. This year, Cauliflower Alley is awarding me its highest honor, the Iron Mike Mazurki Award. I am very proud of that honor. I will be glad to see all the guys this year.

Q: Your autobiography, *King Of The Ring: The Harley Race Story*, was released in 2004. For people who haven't read your book yet, what would they find out about Harley Race that they didn't know before?

A: First off, I want to stress it is not a tell-all book, no juicy gossip or tidbits. My philosophy behind the book is the same as my promotion's motto, "Shut up and wrestle." Ric Flair wrote a tell-all book, and his wife left him after that. I don't want to cause anyone else any problems just because I want to sell a book. But I would highly recommend the book because it is a good read.

Q: How did you and your co-writer, Gerry Tritz, get together?

A: He is an editor and writer for our state capital newspaper, the *Jefferson City News Tribune* in Missouri. He did some publicity work for our promotion and is a pretty big wrestling fan. I think the project was exciting for him, too, because it was his first book.

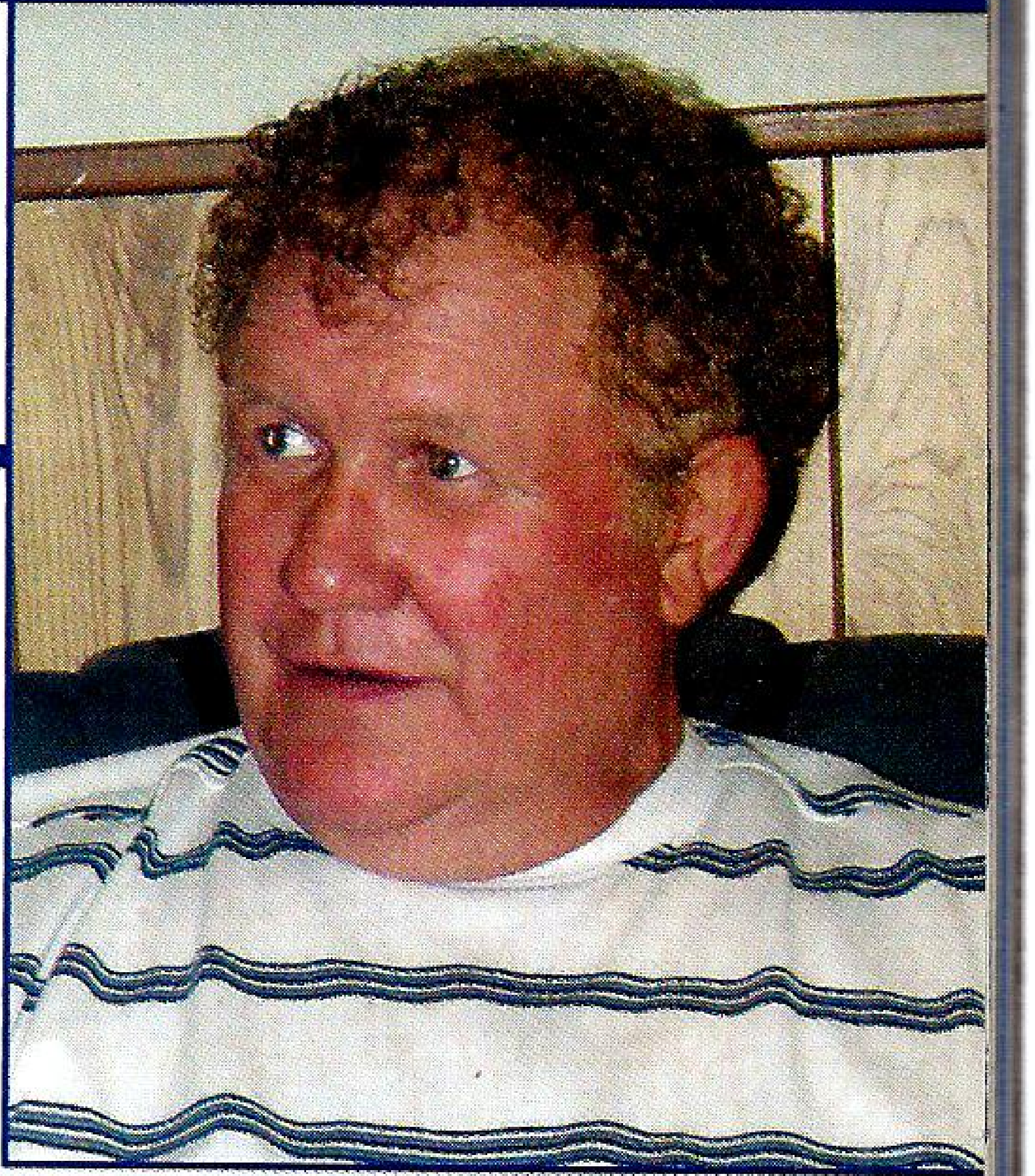
Q: It must have been a nice feeling when the book was finished, to have your career documented between those two covers.

A: Yes, it was a very good feeling. After looking back at my life, I was able to confirm what I already knew: I didn't regret anything I had done in the wrestling business.

Q: When your book came out, a lot of people discovered something they didn't know about your life. While you were still a teenager, you were involved in a car accident that left you partially paralyzed for a time and resulted in the death of your first wife. How did that affect your life and career?

A: Other than the obvious personal tragedy, it almost ended my career. Surgeons had to insert two metal braces and 12 pins to hold my shattered forearm together. Four screws were inserted into my right leg, just below the knee. Fortunately, those injuries happened when I was still a young man and strong enough to recuperate and have a successful wrestling career.

> **“If I could do it all over again, and get beat up and deal with the aches and pains, I’d love to do it again. It was all a lot of fun. I wouldn’t have changed hardly any of it.”**



Q: How did you break into the wrestling business?

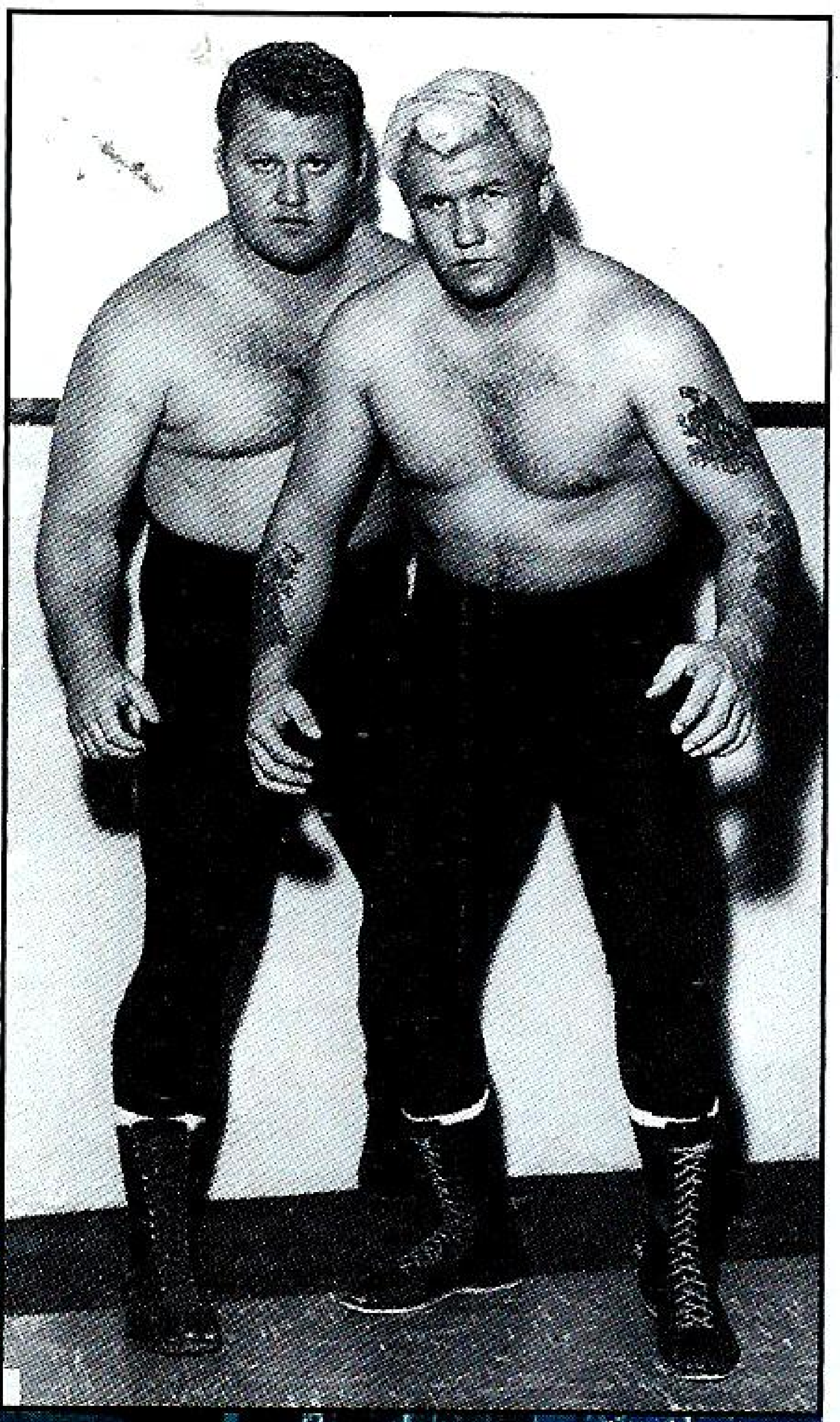
A: At the age of 15, I started wrestling at Gust Karras’ traveling carnival. Gust Karras was a promoter out of St. Joseph. He also gave me steady work by letting me drive wrestlers back and forth from the airport. I got to know some of the wrestlers, including Buddy Austin and Ray Gordon, by doing that. Buddy Austin, especially, was instrumental in getting me started as a wrestler. I also worked on a farm that was owned by Stanislaus Zbyszko, a former world champion in the 1920s, and his brother, Wladek Zbyszko. After I got done with all those farm chores, they took me to the barn and stretched me. Aside from that, I worked out at the YMCA and learned amateur wrestling. I wanted to succeed as a pro wrestler, so I wanted to master all the basics.

Q: Since you started at the young age of 15 back in 1959, I suppose you didn’t have much of an athletic background.

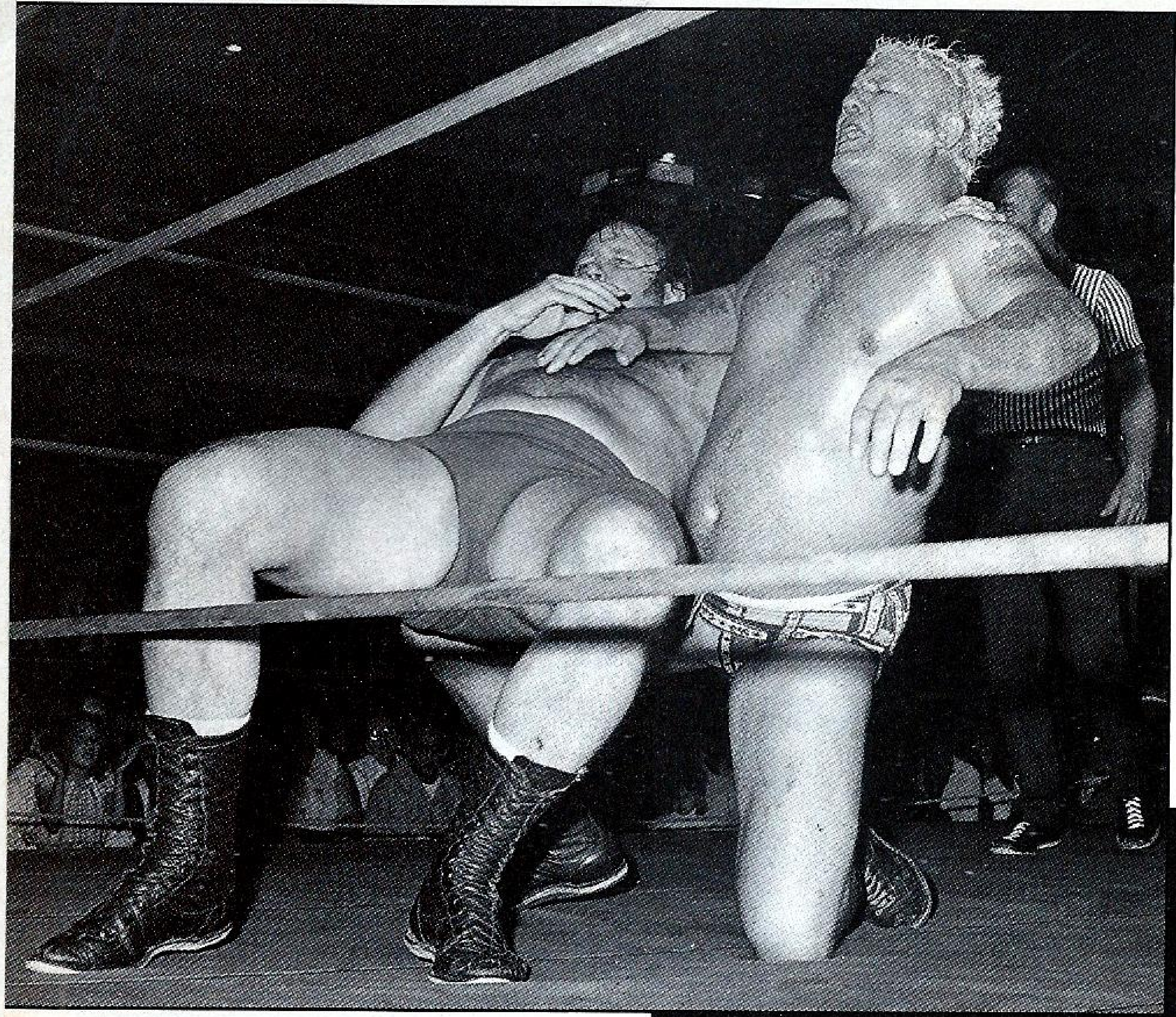
A: Actually, I was always involved in sports. I was a big kid, got into a few playground fights, and did pretty well at basketball and football.

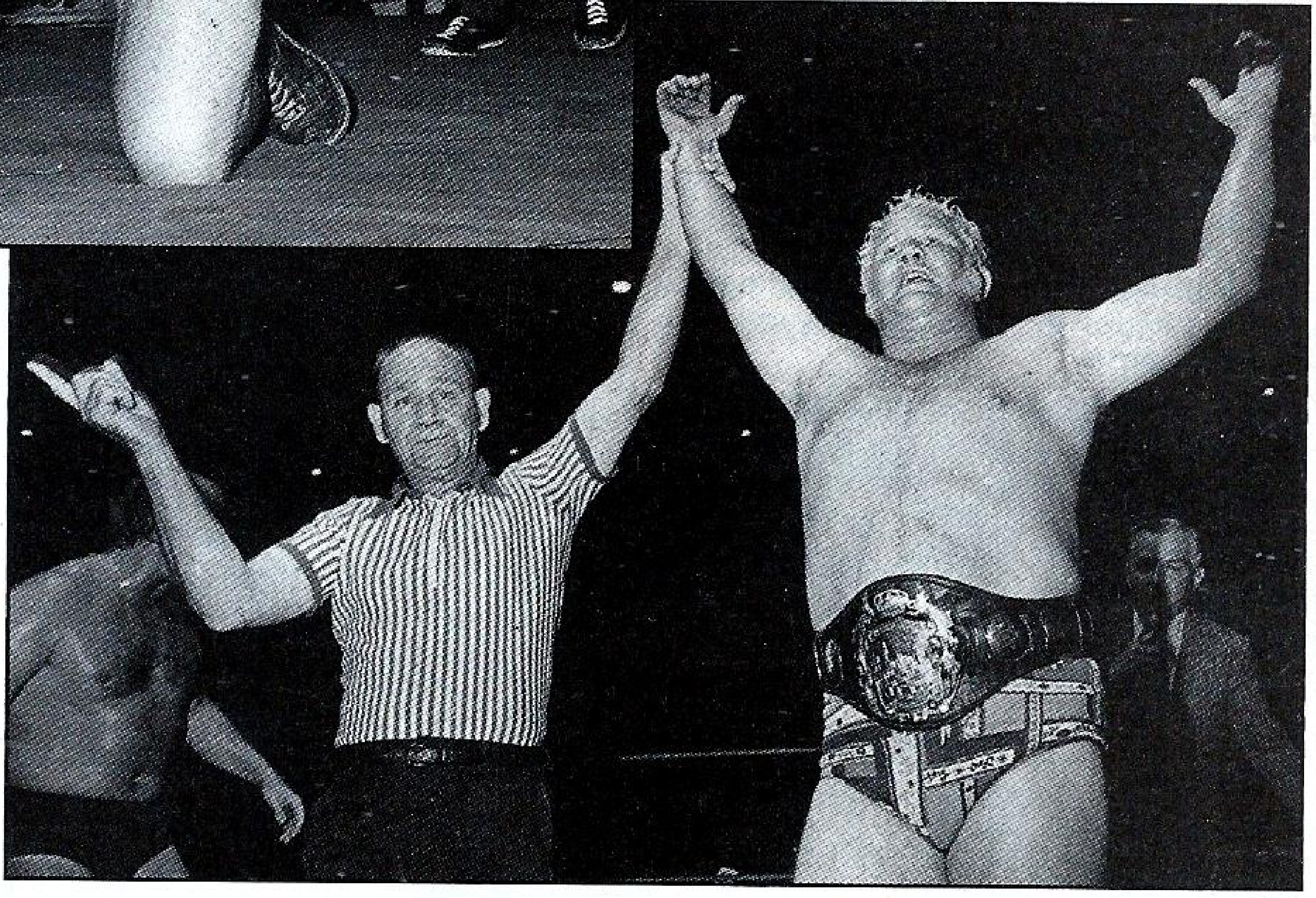
Q: What did your friends and family think of your new profession?

A: My family had a big laugh. They didn’t take it seriously. We lived in a small town of 135 people, which is down to 49 today, and I wrestled in larger towns and cities that were far away. They didn’t appreciate the fact that I was a decent wrestler who was wrestling in packed gyms and arenas. About six to eight months later, they saw me on TV, and it started to sink in for them. They knew my wrestling career wasn’t a joke. They knew I was good at it, and, given some time, I could



Larry Hennig and Race held the AWA World tag team title three times in the mid-’60s (right). Hennig’s son, Curt, would go on to have a fine pro career. Race’s son, Justin, while an excellent amateur, never turned pro, but he did attend a lot of events with his dad (below).





After thousands of matches, Race has no trouble picking one career highlight: winning his first NWA World title, from Dory Funk Jr., on May 24, 1973.

make a decent living at it.

Q: Where did you and your family live?

A: We lived in Quitman, Missouri. I was born in Maryville, but we moved to Quitman later. Have you ever heard of Skidmore, Missouri?

Q: Yes, I have.

A: If you have, you probably know about the "Skidmore Bully." His name was Kenny McElroy. They did a story on the guy on *60 Minutes*. Kenny used to go to the bars in Skidmore when the old-timers got their Social Security checks and scare them into buying him beers. If they didn't, he'd slap them around. After I became a wrestler and was touring the country, I visited Skidmore and was drinking in one of those bars. Kenny started his crap and I said, "Not today, Kenny. Today, it's you and me." So, we went outside, and I laid him out with one punch. If I had known it would be that easy to shut him up, I would've done it a lot sooner.

Kenny was such a bully that someone killed him in the town square in 1981. Not one person came forward, and no one was arrested. That's why *60 Minutes* did a story on him.

Q: You have a reputation as a tough character yourself. In his autobiography, Hulk Hogan talked about how he was afraid you were out to break his legs when the WWF first ran a show in Kansas City during the company's national expansion, and, in his autobiography, Ric Flair mentioned that you accompanied him to Japan to make sure he wasn't double-crossed by the local promotion there. How did you earn this reputation?

A: That's simple. I never let anybody push me around. Some people tried to do it, and they regretted it afterward.

Q: It must be good to have that reputation. That discourages people from messing with you to begin with.

A: Yes, that's true. If people know there's a penalty for screwing around with you, odds are they won't do it.

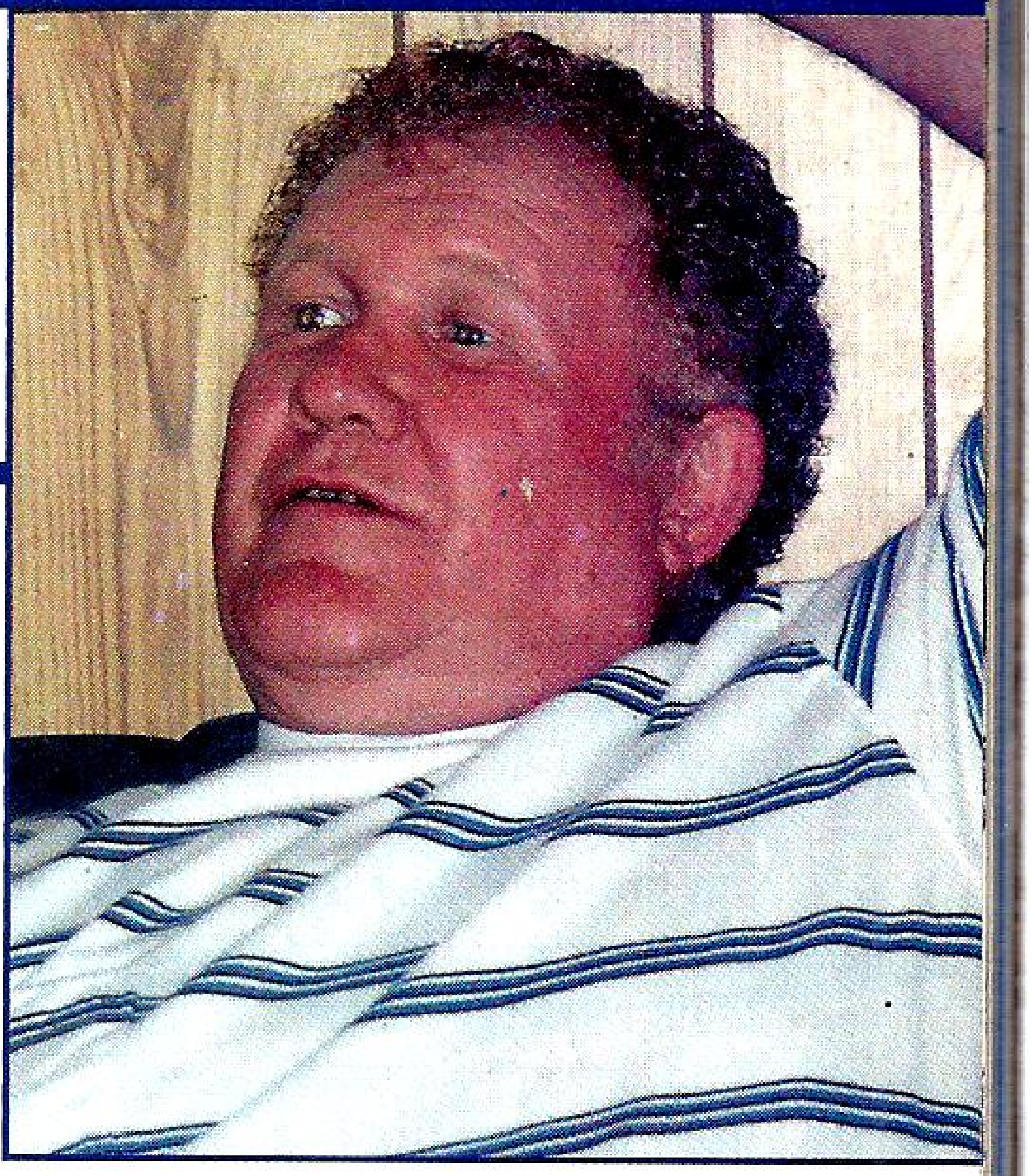
Q: What was your first real lesson in the wrestling business?

A: The business was a lot harder than it looked, in all dimensions of it. The wrestling inside the ring was tough and took a toll on your body. And then there was the travel. So much driving and so much time away from your family takes a physical and mental toll. The wrestling inside the ring was tough, but the travel was even harder.

Q: Today, the premature deaths of pro wrestlers—due to recreational drugs and steroids—is a major issue. Back in your prime, I suppose car travel was a major issue.

A: Yes, car travel was the riskiest aspect of all. Year after year, you hear about how many deaths were caused because of auto accidents in each state and across the country. So, just imagine a

> **“My family had a big laugh. They didn’t take it seriously. About six to eight months later, they saw me on TV, and it started to sink in for them.”**



period of time when wrestlers relied primarily on car travel—and not plane travel—to get from place to place. I’ve driven more miles drunk, backward, and sideways than most people have driven sober. It’s no exaggeration to say I’ve traveled hundreds of thousands of miles as a wrestler.

Q: I imagine it was difficult because you often had to fight sleep while driving overnight to the next town.

A: That’s true, but it was also dangerous driving to the arena earlier in the evening. If you consider that a 2½-hour event started at about 8:30 p.m., which meant we had to get to the arena in the heat of the traffic. Sometimes, it was tough to get to the arena in an unfamiliar town at that time of day.

Q: When talking about your early career, we would be remiss if we didn’t mention your tag team with Larry Hennig. Would

Some of Race’s greatest matches came against Dory’s brother, Terry (below). Though the two are friends today (inset), Race refutes Funk’s claim that he had the toughest schedule of any NWA World champion. Harley wrestled in Tokyo and St. Louis on the same day!

HARLEY
RACE

you agree that he was your best tag team partner?

A: Larry is a class guy from the word "go." Especially in retrospect, I appreciate the calming influence he was on me during that time of my life. I was a hell-raiser in the late-'60s, as wild as can be, and Larry tolerated all of that and did his best to show me the right way. And I know his wife didn't think much of me at the time. I don't blame her. Larry stuck with me, and we're still very good friends. In fact, just the other day, we were talking on the phone, and he mentioned that Minnesota had one of the lightest snowfalls on record last year. That was a far cry from the late-'60s, when it was at least 10 degrees below zero every day during the winter.

Q: I suppose there's something to be said for global warming.

A: Sure, it was definitely colder back then. When Larry and I were in the AWA, we both entered the International 500 Snowmobile Race, all for publicity, of course. The race went from St. Paul, Minnesota, all the way to Winnipeg in Canada. The Queen of England and a bunch of dignitaries were there. Just imagine a 310-pounder like Larry Hennig on a little snowmobile, and actually finishing out the race! That was indicative of Larry's determination to follow everything through.

Q: How did you do in the race?

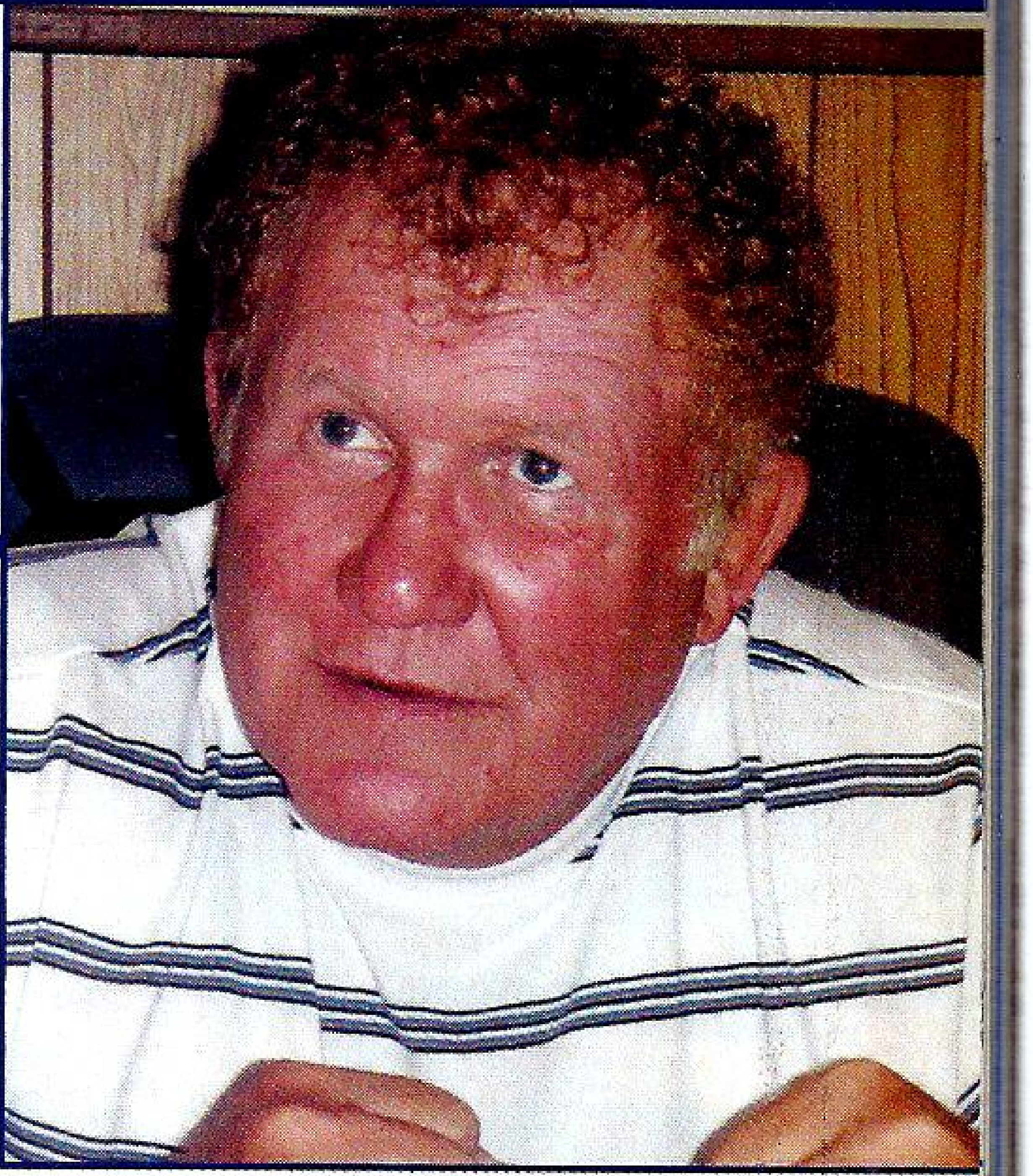
A: I was on an older snowmobile that conked out in the early going. Of course, that was by design!

Q: Were you primarily a tag team wrestler at that stage of your career?

A: No, just during my time in Minnesota, from 1965 to 1967. I've had two great partners, and Larry—by far—was the best. Another good partner was John Long. Early in my career, I wrestled in Tennessee as "Jack Long," the brother of John Long. There, I won my

"Handsome" Harley is a man of many interests, including art (why is *he* naked?), motorcycling (a Honda and not a Harley?), and hunting (when does women season begin?).

"I've driven more miles drunk, backward, and sideways than most people have driven sober. It's no exaggeration to say I've traveled hundreds of thousands of miles as a wrestler."



first title, the Southern tag team title, with John. He was a good partner, and did a lot to help a young kid coming up in the business.

Q: When did you become part of the NWA title mix?

A: That was in 1973, and Dory Funk Jr. had been champion since 1969, a pretty long time. Sam Muchnick, the promoter in St. Louis, basically controlled the world title and all of wrestling, except for Vince McMahon Sr.'s territory in New York and Verne Gagne's territory in Minnesota. I wasn't an internationally known wrestler at the time, but I was the top guy in St. Louis and Kansas City. So it made sense that the top guy in the top promoter's territory would become the world heavyweight champion.

Q: Plus, you had that tough-guy reputation we discussed earlier. Was that a factor in the decision? After all, Sam Muchnick wouldn't have to worry about someone double-crossing the champion for the title.

A: That was probably part of it.

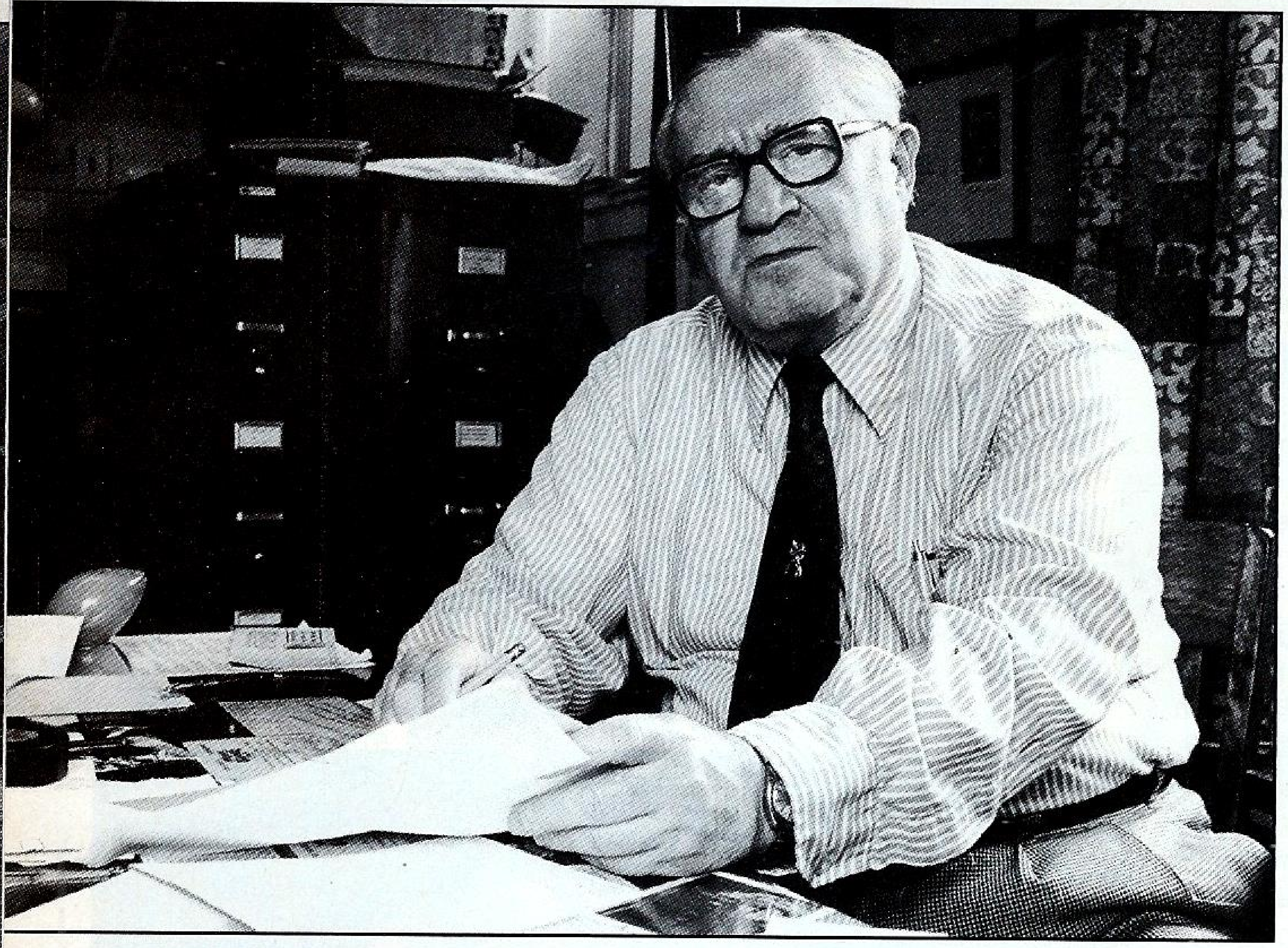
Q: I think it's important for today's fans to understand how important St. Louis was to the wrestling business. Today, people regard Madison Square Garden as the Mecca of pro wrestling, and assume that was always the case.

A: You're absolutely right. Madison Square Garden has always been an important arena, but keep in mind that it didn't become very important until Vince McMahon Sr. had control of it. When I was coming up as a wrestler, the Kiel Auditorium in St. Louis was unparalleled in the wrestling world. Lou Thesz and so many great champions had defended the title there. Madison Square Garden just didn't have the history that the Kiel Auditorium had.

Q: How did you like dealing with Sam Muchnick? What kind of person was he?

A: He was a kind and honest individual and always took time to help

The only way to effectively wrestle Andre the Giant is to first find a way to get him to the mat. They may not have had much fun once the bell rang, but before and after matches, Race and Andre got along great.



Long-time St. Louis promoter Sam Muchnick was, according to Race, a man of his word, which was a rarity in the business. Race also cites Vince McMahon Jr. as a man who can be trusted.

the community. His word was his bond. That is so important in the wrestling business, and I would say Sam's honesty was the key to his success.

Q: Who else was an honest promoter?

A: Believe it or not, and you may be surprised to hear me say this, but Vince McMahon Jr. has always been honest with me and treated me very well. I don't have a complaint against the man.

Q: Among some people, Vince McMahon Sr. had that same reputation. In a *Sports Illustrated* article, Bob Backlund was quoted as saying, "If Vince Sr. told you it was going to rain, you brought your umbrella."

A: Yes, I think Vince Jr. saw his father's method of doing business, and thought it was a good model.

Q: It's interesting that you mention that, because "respect" is often mentioned whenever the topic of Harley Race comes up. Why did you become such a respected person in the business?

A: I'm flattered that anyone would say that about me, and the compliment is much appreciated. I take my word very seriously. If I said I was going to do something, I did it. Otherwise, I kept my mouth shut. During that era, there was a premium placed on honesty because there was so much potential for backstabbing in the wrestling business. Back then, you would truly choose to walk through the fires of hell before going back on your word.

Q: Your first reign as champion in 1973 didn't last that long, but, by 1977, the NWA had settled on you as a long-term champion. Why did they think you would be a good champion?

A: Again, Vince McMahon Sr. was instrumental in backing me as champion. Although Vince Sr. ran the WWWF in the Northeast, he was still on the NWA Board of Directors. He paid attention to my first reign as champion and knew I could have a good match with anybody. And I think that was the logic behind everyone's thinking, because I could wrestle good guys and bad guys, regardless of their styles.

Q: Terry Funk told me that he had the most grueling schedule of any NWA champion, and bragged about his 310 title defenses within 14 months. Was your schedule tougher than his?

A: Terry is wrong about that. There's no question that I had the toughest schedule of any NWA champion. One time, I defended the title on two continents on the same Friday night. How did I do that? I defended the title in Tokyo, Japan, got on a plane, gained a day by crossing the international dateline, and defended the title in St. Louis on the same night. I flew out of St. Louis the next morning and wrestled Carlos Colon in Puerto Rico on that Saturday. During a tour of Australia, I wrestled five one-hour draws and two 90-minute draws within less than a week.

Q: Living close to the Mid-Atlantic territory, I was first exposed to you back in 1983, the era of your seventh NWA title, the $25,000 bounty, and Starrcade '83. Did you enjoy that angle and that historic event?

A: Sure, I did. It was a privilege to pass the torch to Flair. There were so many great wrestlers in the Crockett promotion at the time, most notably Flair and Ricky "The Dragon" Steamboat.

Q: What was your favorite place to wrestle, other than Missouri?

A: St. Louis, of course, is at the top of the list, but I would also have to say Madison Square Garden. While it didn't come close to the Kiel Auditorium in my mind, the atmosphere in the building and its location in New York City gave it a special aura. Also, I have to mention the Pontiac Silverdome at WrestleMania III. I had traveled around the world, defended the

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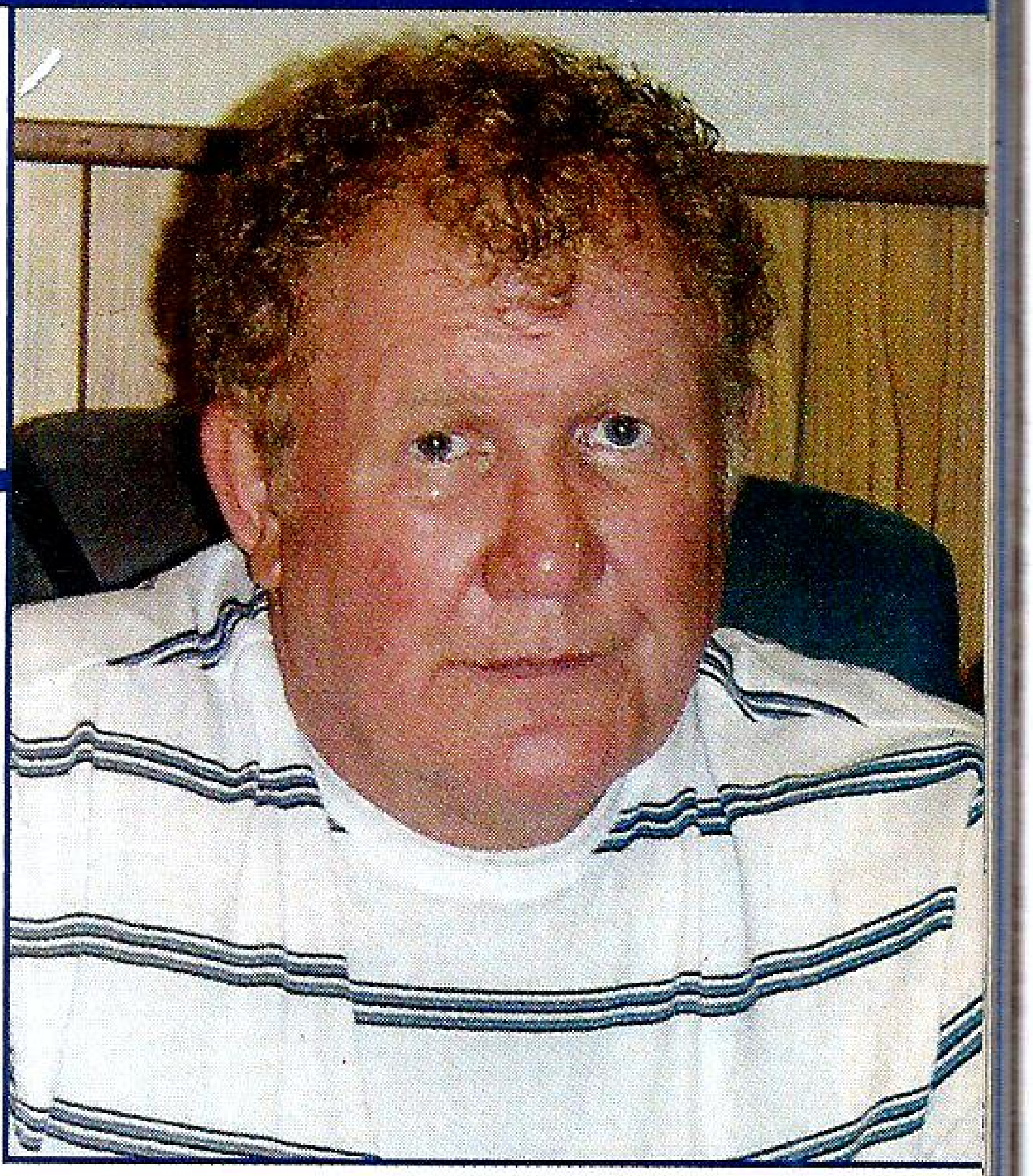


title in front of 30,000 people in Tokyo, but nothing was as spectacular as the sound of those 93,000 people at the Silverdome.

Q: Was that a distraction for you?

A: No, I couldn't let it become a distraction. Junkyard Dog was my opponent that night, so I needed my full concentration to make that match work. But I'll never forget that sound for the rest of my life.

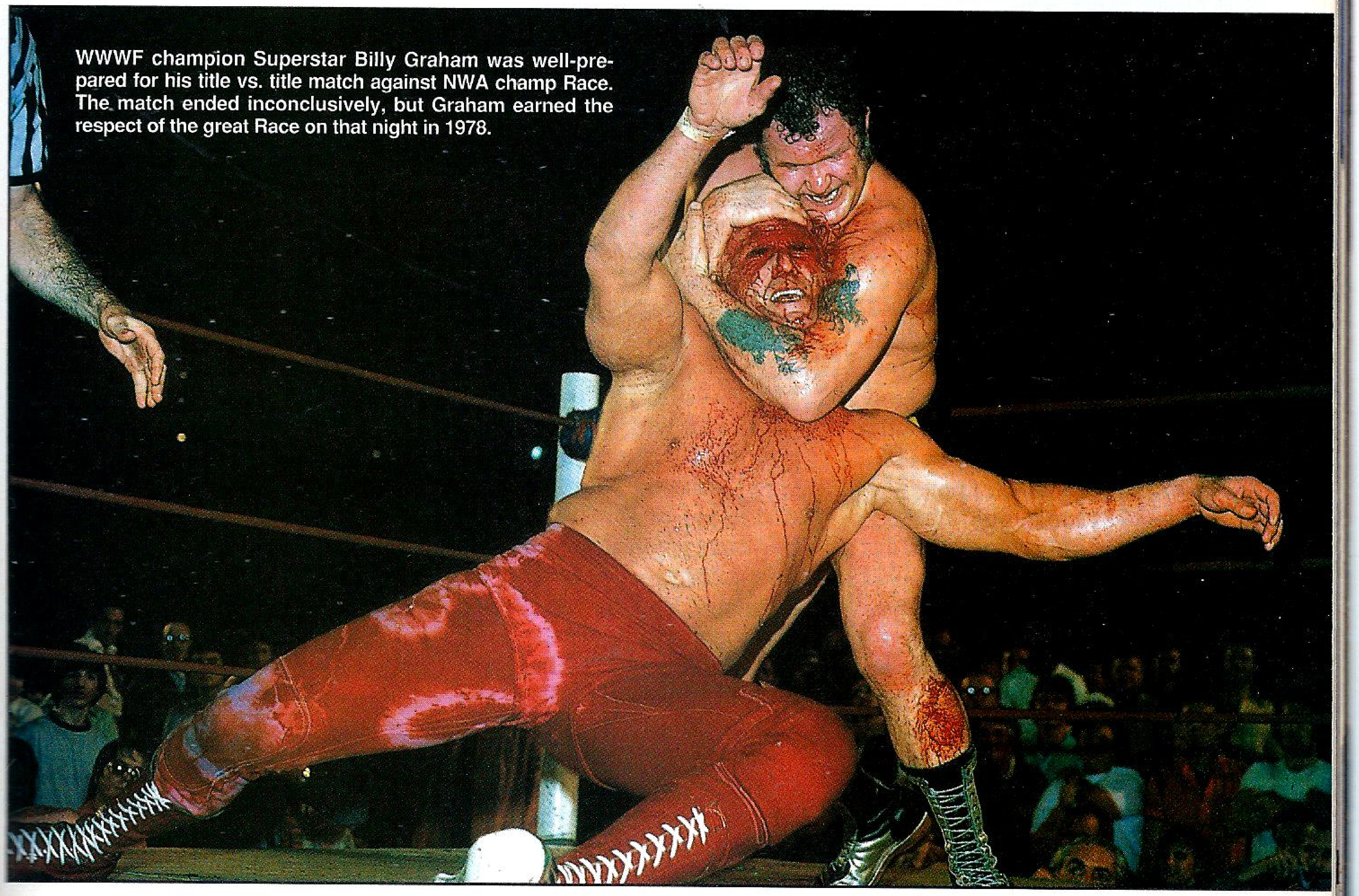
Q: You wrestled in a number of title-unification matches as champion, and none of those matches ended with a clear-cut winner. But I have to think the atmosphere for those matches were unique. In particular, I'm thinking about your title unification match against Superstar Graham, who held the WWWF title at the time. It was promoted as the "Super Bowl Of Wrestling" at the Orange Bowl in Miami, wasn't it?

A: That's right. Going into the match, I didn't think Billy Graham would be able to go for 60 minutes, but he did. He worked hard at that match, and he proved himself to me that night. Considering his physique and his limitations in the ring, it's a real testament to Graham that he went a full hour. Vince Sr. demanded that Gorilla Monsoon be the special referee, to make sure there wasn't a double-cross.

Q: Were Florida fans familiar with the WWWF champion?

A: We made a point to have the match on the east coast of Florida, where many of the residents had lived in the Northeast at one point or another, and would be familiar with both Graham and me.

Q: And you had matches against



WWWF champion Superstar Billy Graham was well-prepared for his title vs. title match against NWA champ Race. The match ended inconclusively, but Graham earned the respect of the great Race on that night in 1978.

Race's second NWA World title reign began on August 26, 1979, when he beat Dusty Rhodes before an enthusiastic "American Dream" crowd in Tampa, Florida. A successful NWA champion has to have the fortitude to wrestle before hostile crowds. Harley never seemed to have a problem with that.

WWF champion Bob Backlund in Madison Square Garden, among other venues. Didn't you cross paths with Backlund in Missouri before he became champion?

A: He did wrestle in St. Louis and Kansas City, and was the Missouri State champion. But my first match against Backlund was in Florida. He was a great athlete, and I have the utmost respect for him. We were down in Florida during the gas crunch, but I suppose you're too young to remember that.

Q: I barely remember, but I've been having flashbacks as of late.

A: Anyway, one reason Backlund was in such fine shape is because he was too cheap to get a car and rode his bike everywhere. He had incredible endurance.

Q: You mentioned that Gorilla Monsoon was made the special referee during your match with Graham to ensure against a double-cross. Was that a concern when you were NWA champion?

A: Generally, shot-takers never got the opportunity to wrestle for the title. There was a greater danger back then, because a lot of wrestlers didn't like to be pinned. There were even less two-counts back then, and more one-counts, but you rarely see those today.

Q: Looking back, the decade of the '70s was the decade of the rugged champions, which included Jack Brisco, you, and the Funks. What was the common ingredient that made the four of you successful?

A: Each of us could wrestle a broomstick and make it look good. Of course, I would have to throw Ric Flair in there because he is a phenomenal performer. Dusty [Rhodes] had his share of great matches, too. The world champion had to deliver the goods inside the ring, no matter how bad the hometown boy was. Nick Gulas was a promoter in Tennessee, and I had to carry his son, George, for 60 minutes. Although I was the heel, the crowd was cheering me at the end of that match!

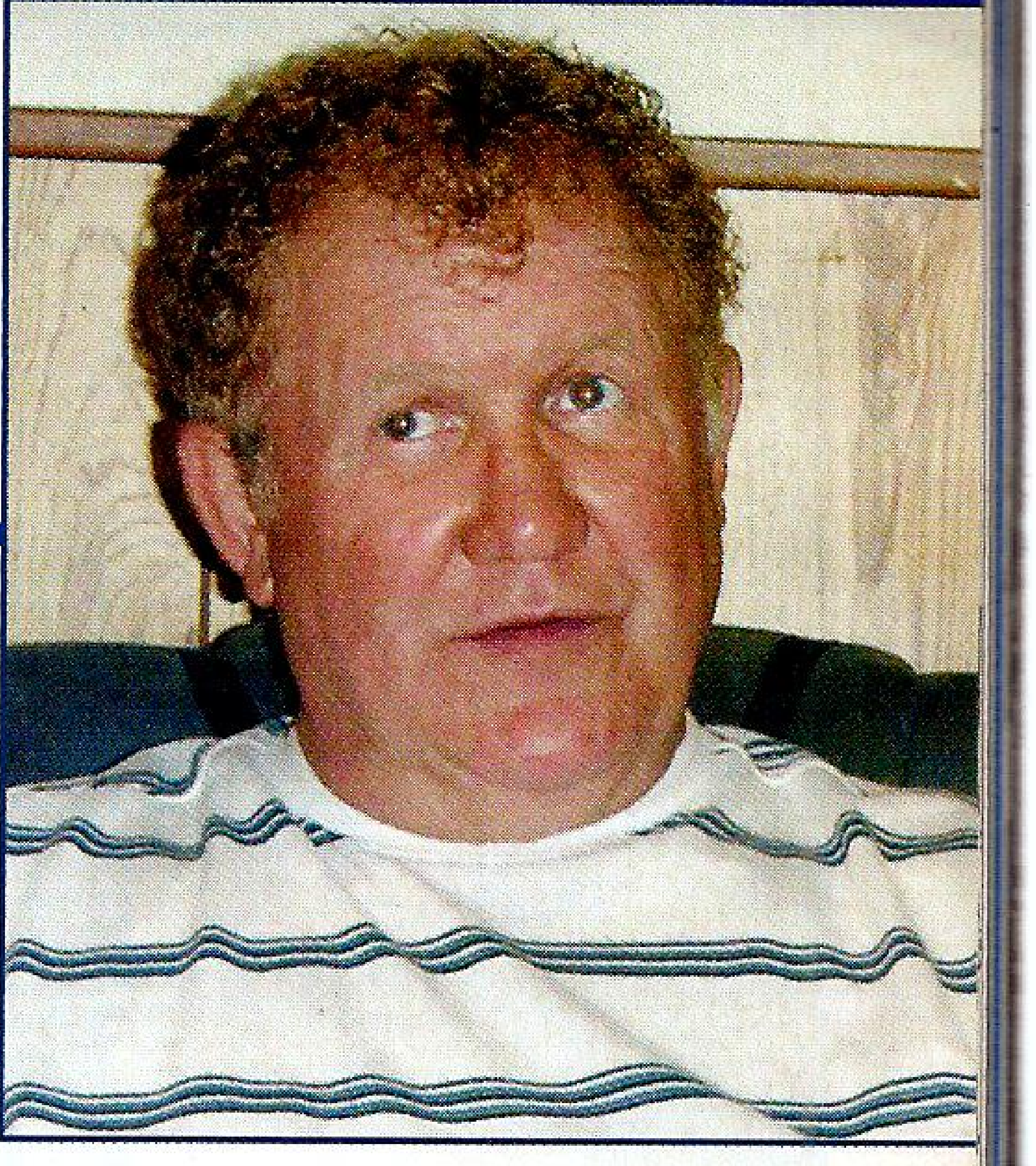
Q: When did you transition to the promotion side of the business?

A: I became involved with the office in Kansas City, and went on to do some booking in Atlanta, and later in Florida with Eddie Graham. Gust Karras, Bob Geigel, and Pat O'Connor allowed me to purchase 10 percent of the Kansas City promotion in 1973, and I got a larger share when Gust died in 1976. Later, Bob, Pat, and I bought into Sam Muchnick's St. Louis promotion. When Sam retired, Verne Gagne purchased a large share of it.

Q: Of course, your Central States promotion was one of many casualties of the WWF's national expansion. Eventually, you went to work for the enemy, the WWF. Was the WWF different from what you were used to, or was it basically the same thing with just a bigger audience?

A: It was all the same to me. I was in a unique position because I had already gained experience in arenas throughout the world, and was accustomed to defend-

> **If I said I was going to do something, I did it. Otherwise, I kept my mouth shut. There was a premium placed on honesty because there was so much potential for backstabbing in the wrestling business.**



ing the NWA title in front of large crowds. That prepared me for just about anything, so it wasn't that big a transition for me.

Q: You had even wrestled Hogan before, in St. Louis I think.

A: Yes, that's a good point. I had wrestled many of those guys before.

Q: You had a memorable wrestling persona in the WWF, as the "King Of Wrestling." Later in WCW, you adopted yet another role, as the manager of Big Van Vader and Lex Luger. Did you work for WCW in any other capacity other than managing?

Race thoroughly enjoyed the experience of traveling to New York City to put the NWA title on the line against WWF champion Bob Backlund. Backlund seemed to have the skills and stamina to win the match, but Race wasn't about to go home without his cherished belt.

A: When I returned to wrestling after having abdominal surgery, Ole Anderson was the booker in WCW, and he said I could do whatever I wanted. Ole and I went way back, because we used to travel together in the '60s. I decided to become a manager.

Q: I remember at least one occasion when Vader wasn't able to appear for one reason or another, and you got into the ring to wrestle Ric Flair! *Pro Wrestling Illustrated* even did a story on it. Did you enjoy getting back into the ring?

A: Sure, I did! Vader, for a big guy, was very agile, but he had the worst attitude toward the business of anyone I've ever known. He was a football player and thought he was above the business.

Q: Did you enjoy being in the corner? What did you try to add to the match?

A: I tried to keep the focus on the wrestlers, and that's why I interfered only when it meant something.

Q: Did you worry, at times, that you were a bigger star than the wrestlers you were managing, and that could be a distraction?

A: I wouldn't let it be. When I cut a promo about Vader or Luger, I talked about them, and not about Harley Race. My role as manager was to promote them.

Race beat Ric Flair for his seventh NWA World title, on June 10, 1983, in St. Louis, breaking a tie with the legendary Lou Thesz and making the celebration that much sweeter.

Q: You mentioned that Ole Anderson had traveled with you. Did you have any other travel buddies?

A: Other than Ole, I didn't have any. But I always made an exception when Andre the Giant came into St. Louis or Kansas City. He would fly in, and I would take him from town to town. That was always a lot of fun.

Q: What was he like?

A: He was a blast. He was very, very funny, but he would turn very, very serious if something wasn't right.

Q: Were you able to fit him in the car?

A: We always had to push the seat all the way back or, in some cases, we had to trade rental cars.

Q: I remember an A&E biography, which had people talking about the way Andre lived in France as a young man. Apparently, he would drive a Volkswagen bug around town with his head sticking out of the sunroof. On a much darker note, you were on hand when Owen Hart died at the Kemper Arena. How tough was it for you to call his wife, and tell her about Owen's death?

A: You just have to put the difficulty of some things out of your mind. It was something that had to be done, and I was the most appropriate person to do it.

Q: Did you have a relationship with the Hart family before that?

A: Yes. As part of an agreement with the NWA, Stu Hart got the champion for 10 days every July. So I made several trips to Calgary, where I met his family. Stu couldn't have been a nicer guy. He could tell stories all day long, and never tell the same story twice. It was a long haul traveling throughout that territory, but Stu was willing to ride every mile with you.

Q: Who has been overlooked in wrestling history—an outstanding wrestler who is at risk of being forgotten?

A: Dory Funk Jr. I know he'll always be on the list of NWA champions, and he still has a presence of today, but I think today's fans underestimate his contribution to the business. He could have a hell of a match with a good guy or a bad guy. You hear a lot about Terry, but not as much about Dory these days. He was one of the all-time greats.

Q: Most wrestlers with long careers consider this an unfair question: What was your favorite match ever?

A: That's the simplest one of all.

Q: Really? You're surprising me.

A: It was in 1973 in Kansas City, when I defeated Dory Funk Jr. for the title.

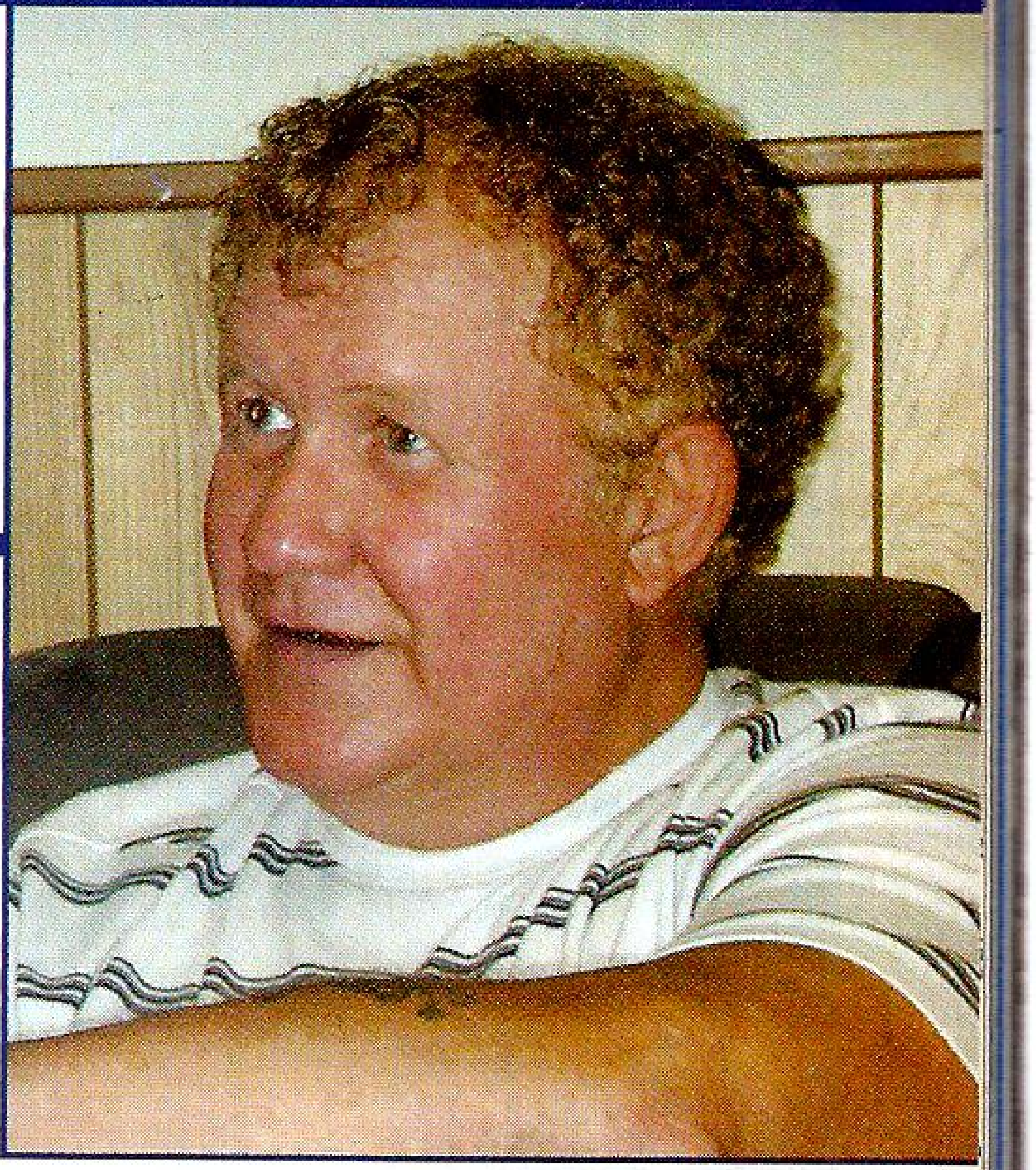
Q: I've seen tapes of that match. I remember how the arena went nuts when the referee's hand hit the mat a third time.

A: That's right. It was an incredible reaction. I'd never heard that loud a sound before. There was a good reason for that, though, because the championship hadn't changed hands in Kansas City since Orville Brown in 1948.

Q: A lot of people suggest that wrestlers are more athletic now, better in some regards ...

A: I disagree. Years ago, wrestlers

"I had traveled around the world, defended the title in front of 30,000 people in Tokyo, but nothing was as spectacular as the sound of those 93,000 people at the Silverdome."



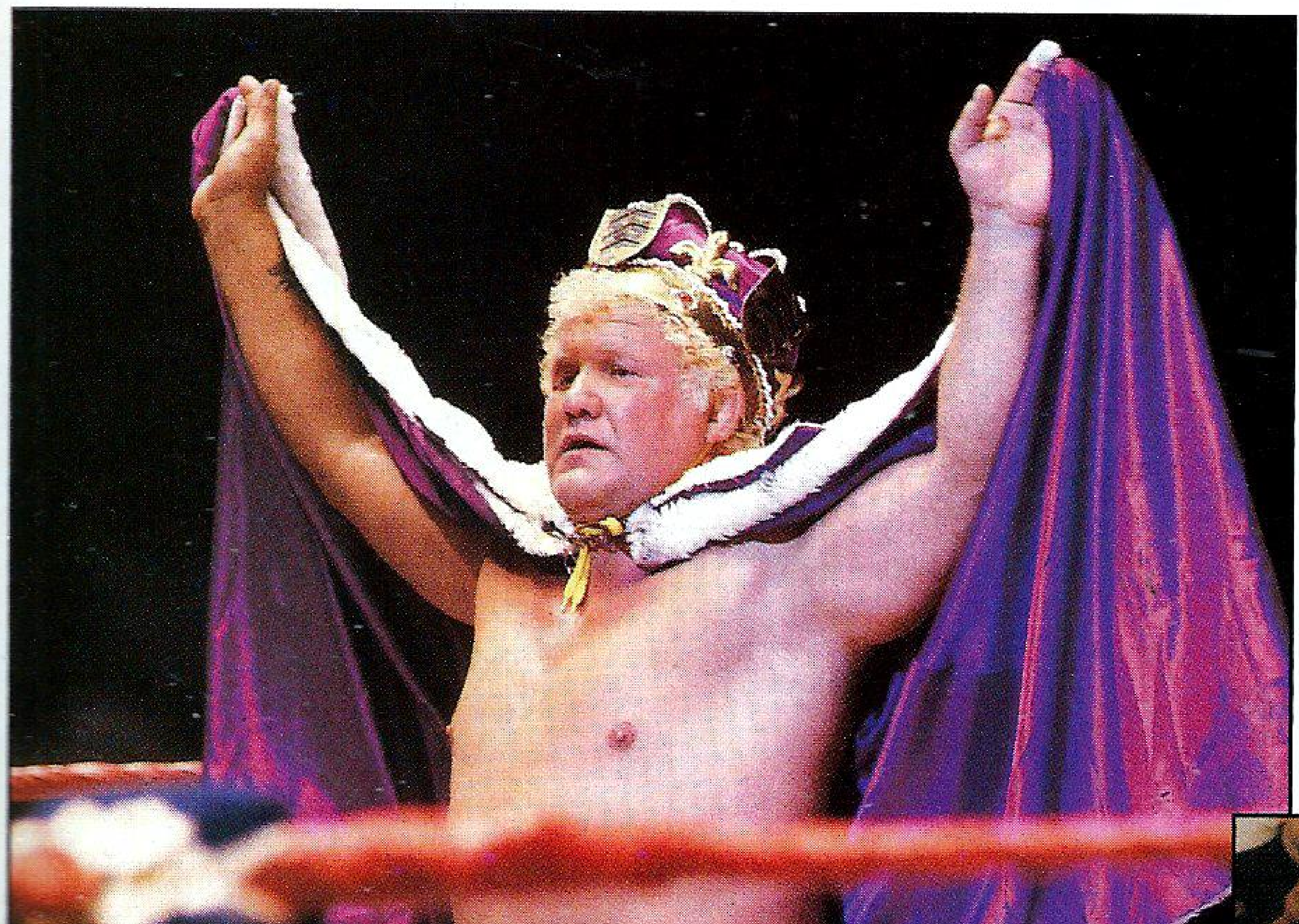
had to wrestle for 40 and 60 minutes every night and had to adapt to new crowds and new situations on the fly. And all of this was without the benefit of steroids. Wrestlers from my generation might not have looked like bodybuilders, but we're still here today.

Q: In other words, your joints might be aching, but you've lived longer.

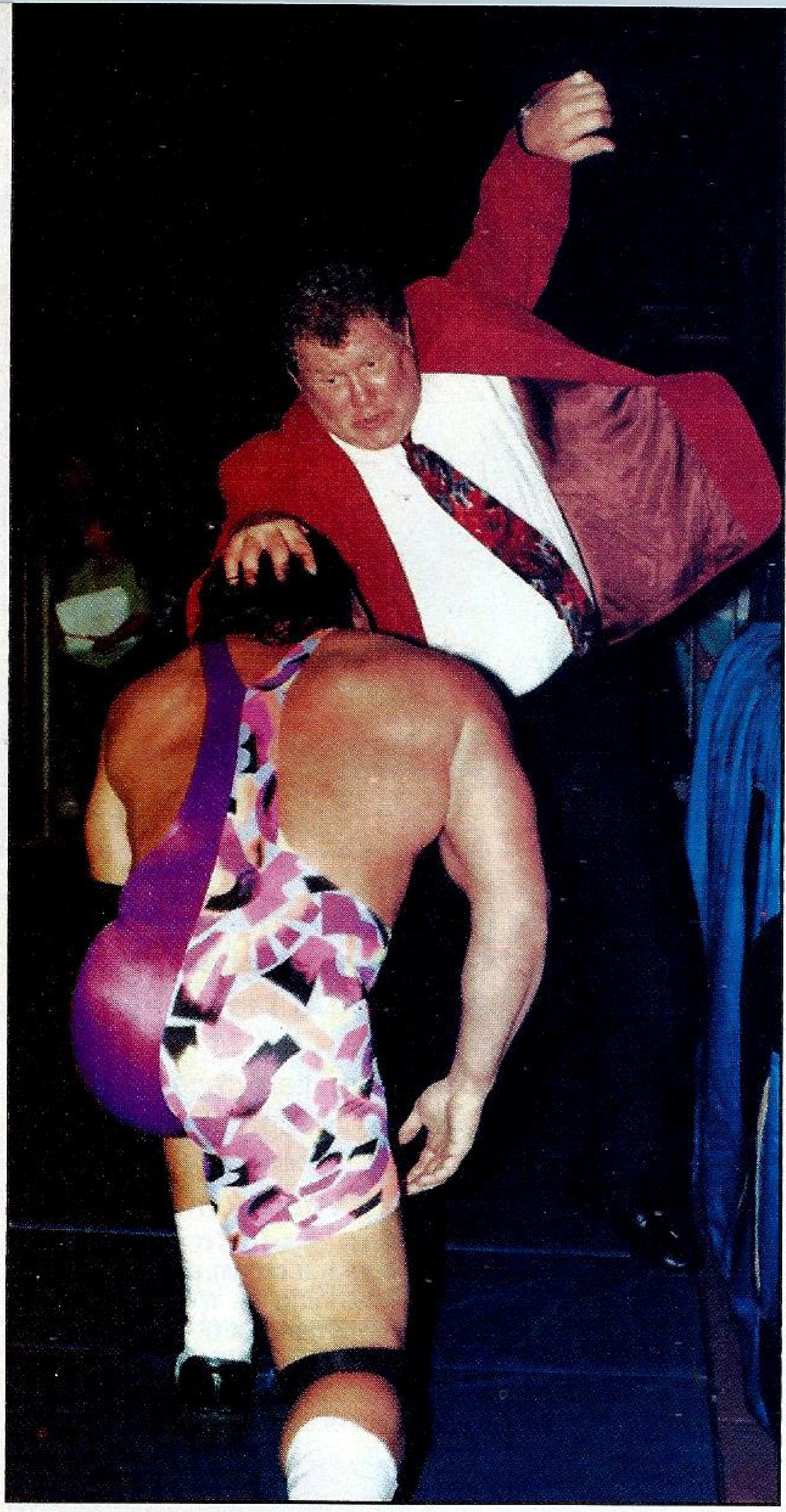
A: That's right.

Q: Because wrestlers were more like free agents back then, did they need a better business sense?

A: Today, wrestlers receive checks from one corporation, WWE for example. It's easier to keep track of what you're making and



Race was fitted with a crown as the "King Of Wrestling" after winning the WWF's 1986 King of the Ring tournament (left). As "King," he was granted a shot at WWF champion Hulk Hogan (below), but it was too late in his career to overtake a man of that stature in his prime.



Turning his attention to managing, Race was quick to interfere (against Scott Steiner, in 1991), but he knew his role was to help promote his wrestlers, Big Van Vader and Lex Luger.

spending. Back when I was champion, it was hard to figure out the bottom line of my earnings and expenditures because I was always moving to the next town, the next promotion.

Q: Tell me about your family life. What is your wife's name?

A: Everyone calls her B.J., but her real name is Beverly. We've been married since the mid-'90s. If I had known her earlier, my life would have been much better and I would have been saved a lot of aggravation. But I'm also very glad to have my son, Justin.

Q: Do you get much of a chance to go fishing?

A: I can't fish. My wife is a much better fisherman than I am. I'm not doing something right.

Q: At least you've done some other things right in your life. There seems to be a nostalgia fad in wrestling right now, with all the reunion conventions and WWE 24/7, for example. Has WWE contacted you regarding any future projects?

A: I was contacted last year, when WWE switched *Raw* to the USA Network. So, I attended that show in Dallas. I saw guys I hadn't seen in a while, such as Ric Flair, Dusty Rhodes, and Ted DiBiase—wrestlers that I have been associated with in the past.

Q: Also, WWE often invites you to attend their shows in Kansas City. Of course, you promoted in that town for many years, and Kansas City—like St. Louis—is synonymous with Harley Race. What was it like to have Randy Orton spit on you at the Kemper Arena?

A: I would have snapped that kid in half when I was younger, and I might have done it that night if security hadn't got between us [laughs]. But, seriously, I enjoyed it—anything to get the juices flowing again. To answer your question, though, WWE knows all they have to do is pick up the phone and I will do what I can for them. And, based on our relationship over the years, I'm confident they will pick up the phone when I call.

Q: When did you start your training school and WLW?

A: My wife retired from banking in 1999, and wrestling is all I have ever known, so opening a training school was a natural choice. We retired to the Lake of the Ozarks in Missouri. I love it here. I can throw a rock from my window and hear it splash in the water. So, I thought this would be the perfect life after wrestling: living on the water and training young wrestlers. I'm not exactly retired, because I stay active. I still go to the office about five days a week.

Q: Have you ever been involved in a business outside of wrestling?

A: No, I've been in the wrestling business since I was 15. I feel very fortunate that I've been able to make my sole living in wrestling since that time.

Q: Of course, one of your trainees is in WWE right now.

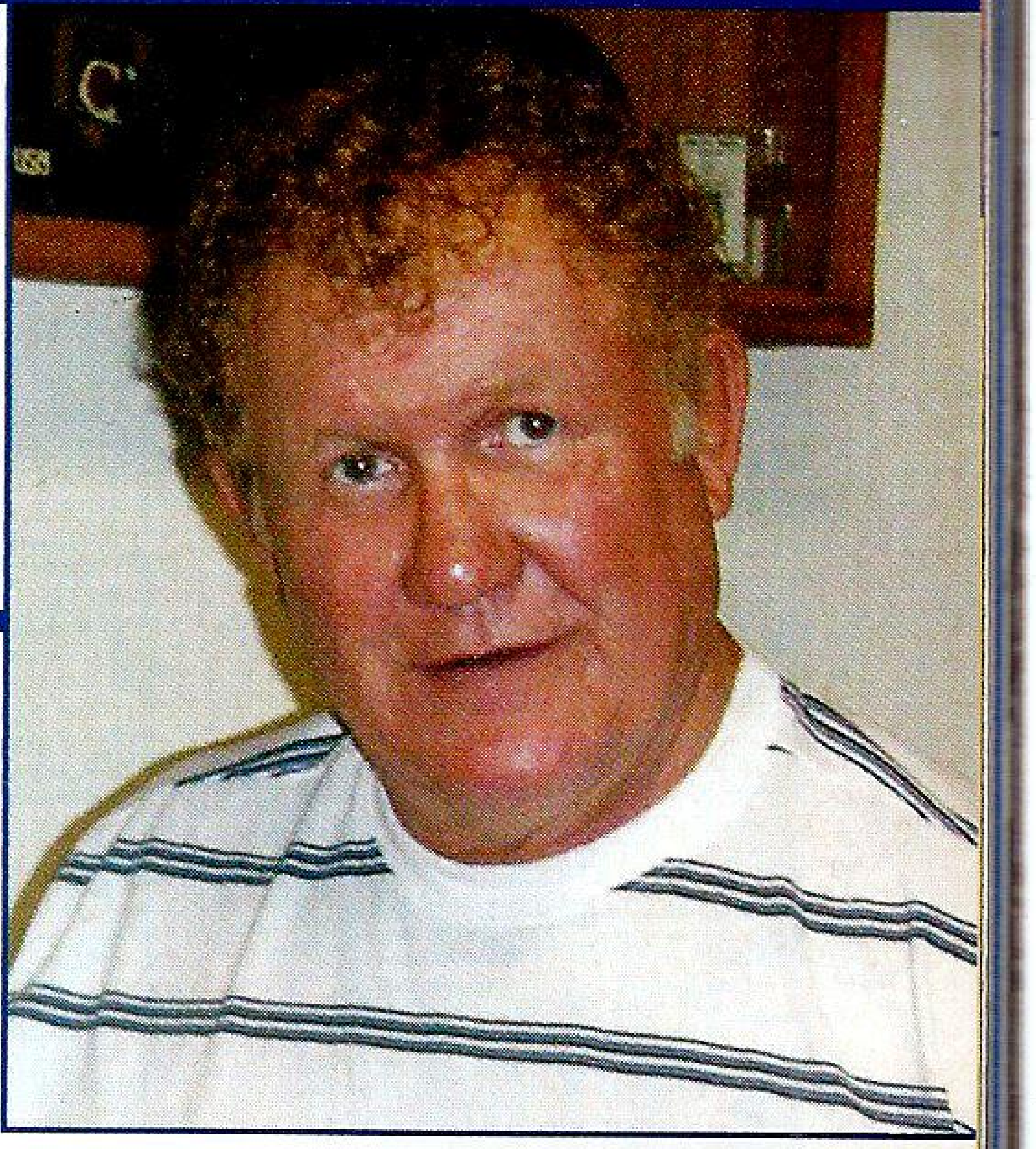
A: That's right. Trevor Murdoch graduated from my training school in Eldon, Missouri, and competed in World League Wrestling before going to WWE. Recently, WWE agreed to hire one of my referees, John Cone.

Q: Did you predict Trevor Murdoch would get this far? He and his partner, Lance Cade, got a big push when they first joined Raw.

A: The minute I met Trevor, I knew there was something special about the kid. And, then when he started working out, learning the holds, and taking bumps in the ring, I knew it for sure. I told my wife and several other people that this kid has what it takes to go all the way. After we trained, and he got some experience in WLW, we helped negotiate some trips to Japan for him. He worked in the NOAH gym for six months, and that training is obvious in his wrestling style. When he tried out for WWE, some of the guys asked him point-blank whether he had wrestled in Japan. The Japanese style is so distinctive that professionals can pick up on it right away.

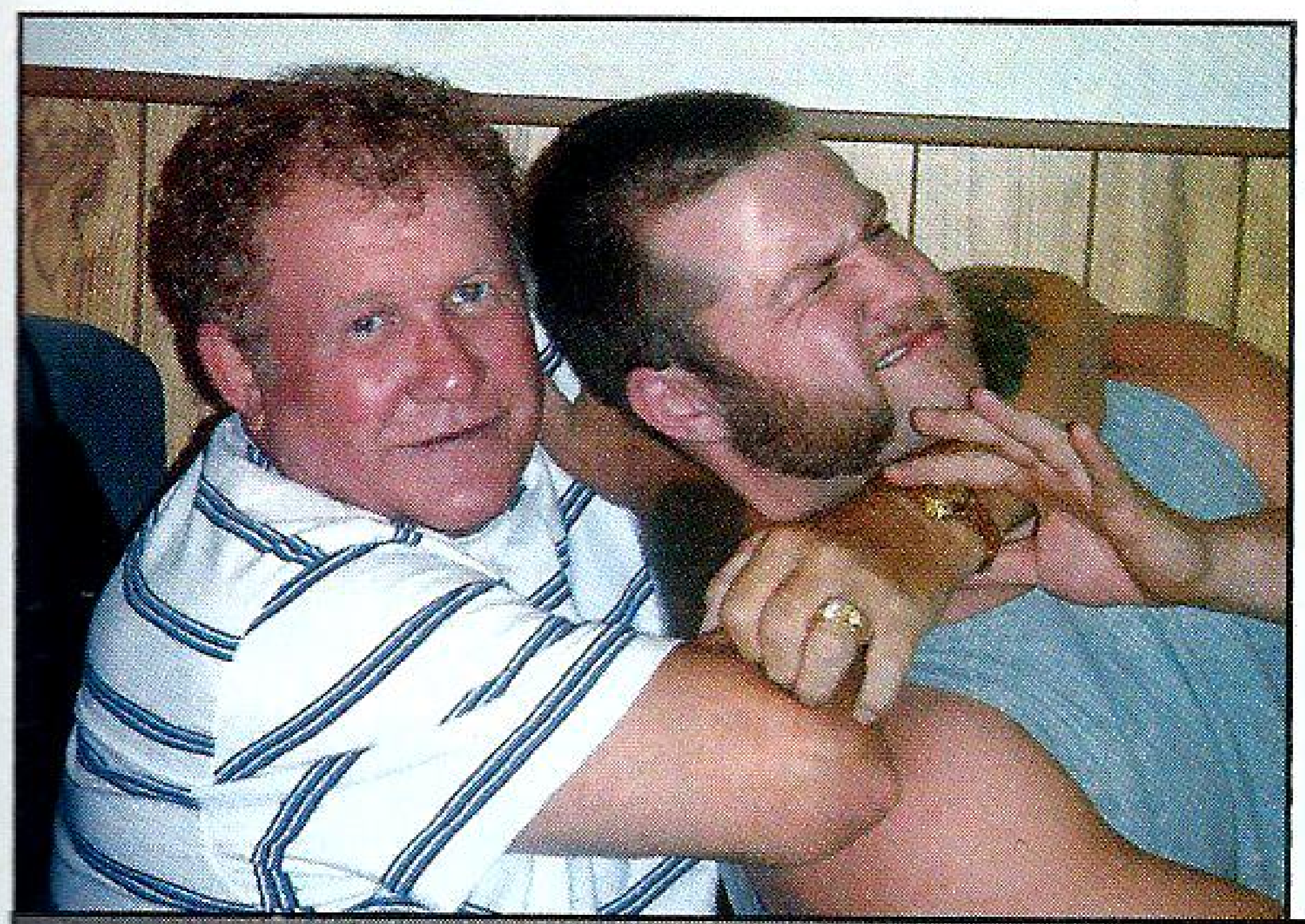
Q: When Trevor first began training

> **"Years ago, wrestlers had to wrestle for 40 and 60 minutes every night ... And all of this was without the benefit of steroids. Wrestlers from my generation might not have looked like bodybuilders, but we're still here today."**



with you and wrestling for WLW, he was known as Trevor Rhodes. But Trevor Murdoch is a much better fit. I recall the crazy moves that Dick Murdoch would do. He would dropkick people and get up into the air surprisingly high with that paunch. He executed moves that seemed to defy his body.

A: Trevor can do exactly the same thing. Looking back, you're right, the name "Murdoch" did suit him a lot better than "Rhodes." But he introduced himself to me as "Trevor Rhodes," so we stuck with that. I have a collection of great kids at WLW. I have both DiBiase kids here, Mike and Teddy, and some other guys who are capable of starting in WWE tomorrow. Trevor Murdoch is already a success, and Superstar Steve continues to make me proud. He's already made 15 trips to Japan, and everyone's going to hear a lot more about him in the future. I'm also proud that WLW has done a lot of charity work for the community, including the United Way, high school boosters, the Elks, and the Shriners. We've raised money for everything, from uniforms and batting cages, to college scholarships.



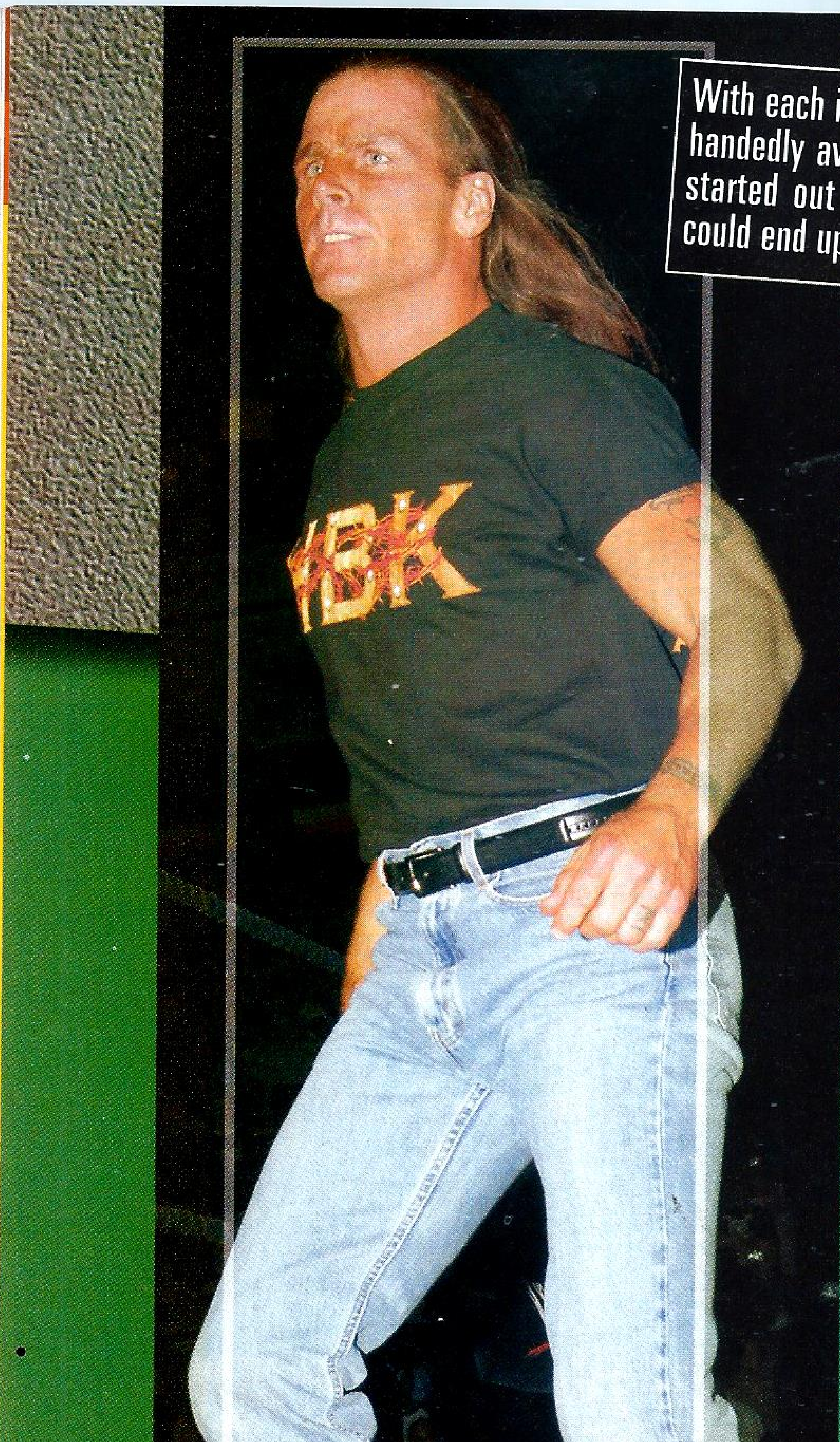
Harley opened the World League Wrestling promotion in 1999, using talent trained at his Harley Race Wrestling Academy. Harley's students will tell you that he is a very intense teacher (below, with Daniel Palmer and Matt Emry) who also takes time to have fun (with Palmer, left).

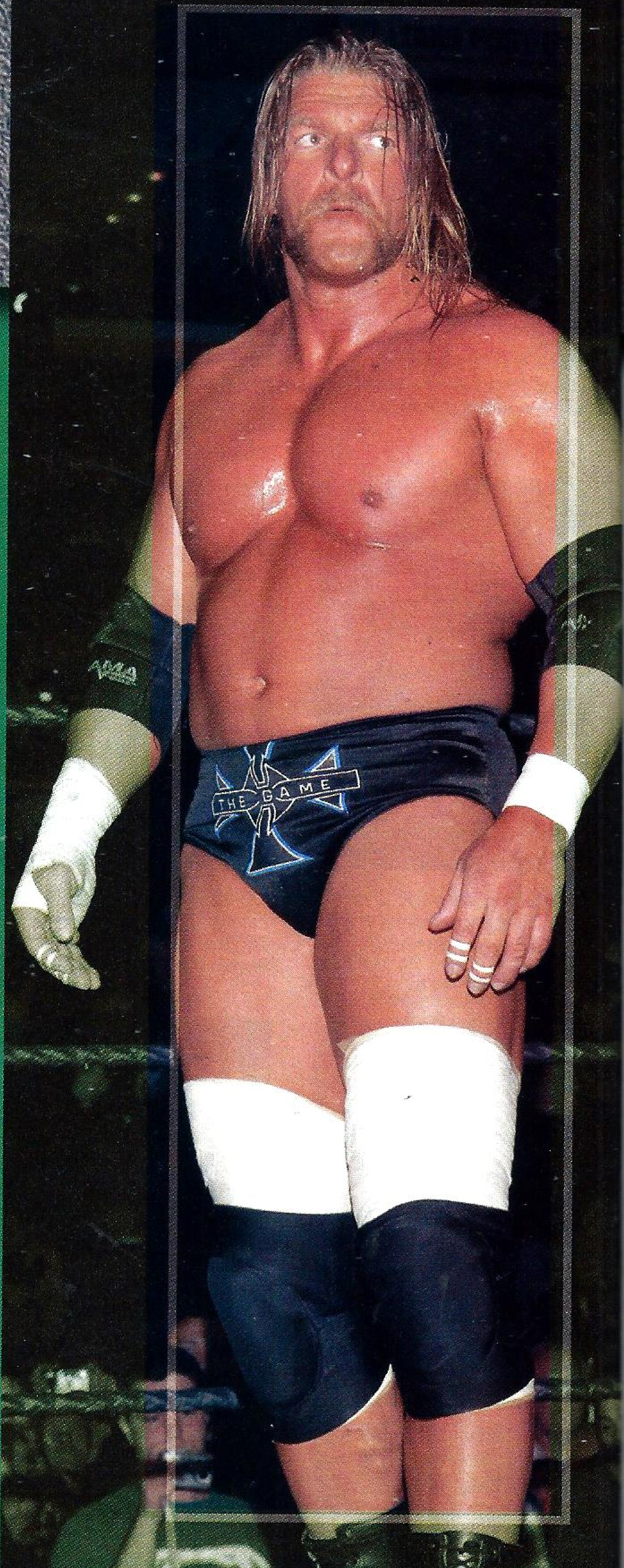
Congratulations Harley
1994 HALL OF FAME

Q: It's wonderful that you're able to take what you know—pro wrestling—and use that knowledge to help people.

A: I wouldn't have had a very good life if not for the fans, for others in my community, and for the guys I've come to know in the business. I'm thankful for every minute of it. ☐

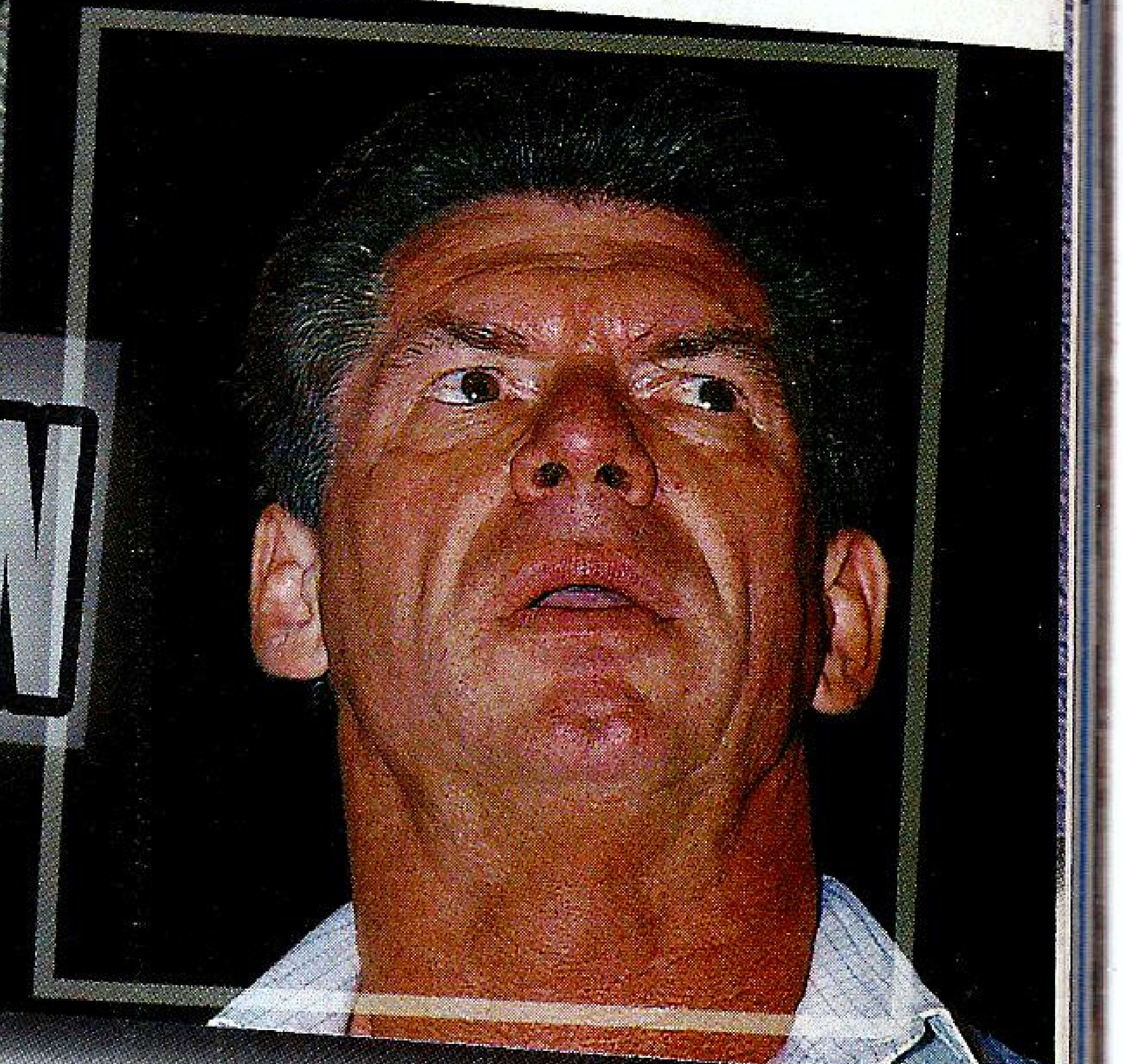
With each insult or personal attack, Vince McMahon is single-handedly awakening the demons of his past. What may have started out as a simple acknowledgement between friends could end up becoming Vince's worst nightmare revisited





Shawn Michaels and Triple-H have been on drastically different career paths since first forming DeGeneration X in the mid-1990s. Vince McMahon's personal vendetta against both men led to the Superstars' realization that there is strength in numbers and that a DX reunion was necessary.

DEGENERATION X



Vince McMahon's Desperate Plot To Derail The Grand Reunion!

By C.F. Hunter

IN MANY WAYS, we have become a culture of empty gestures.

The ambiguity of the two-fingered peace sign, once a salute of love and tolerance, had its death knell when Richard Nixon did a double-barreled version of it as a sign of victory at the door of his helicopter, jowls jiggling. The thumbs-up salute, once made cool by the Fonz's *"Ayyy"* pose, now carries only a nerdy, ironic tone (hence Mick Foley's inability to deliver it with a straight face). Even the proverbial "bird" is flipped so frequently these days that the middle finger has lost much of its visceral punch (thank you very much, Mr. Austin).

But there is one gesture that seems to be enjoying an unexpected renaissance. Although it fell into disuse for over the past six years, it has emerged from obscurity and may well change the world—or at least World Wrestling Entertainment.

It is the crotch chop. It's back, and its meaning and implications nowadays run much deeper than a mere "two words for ya."

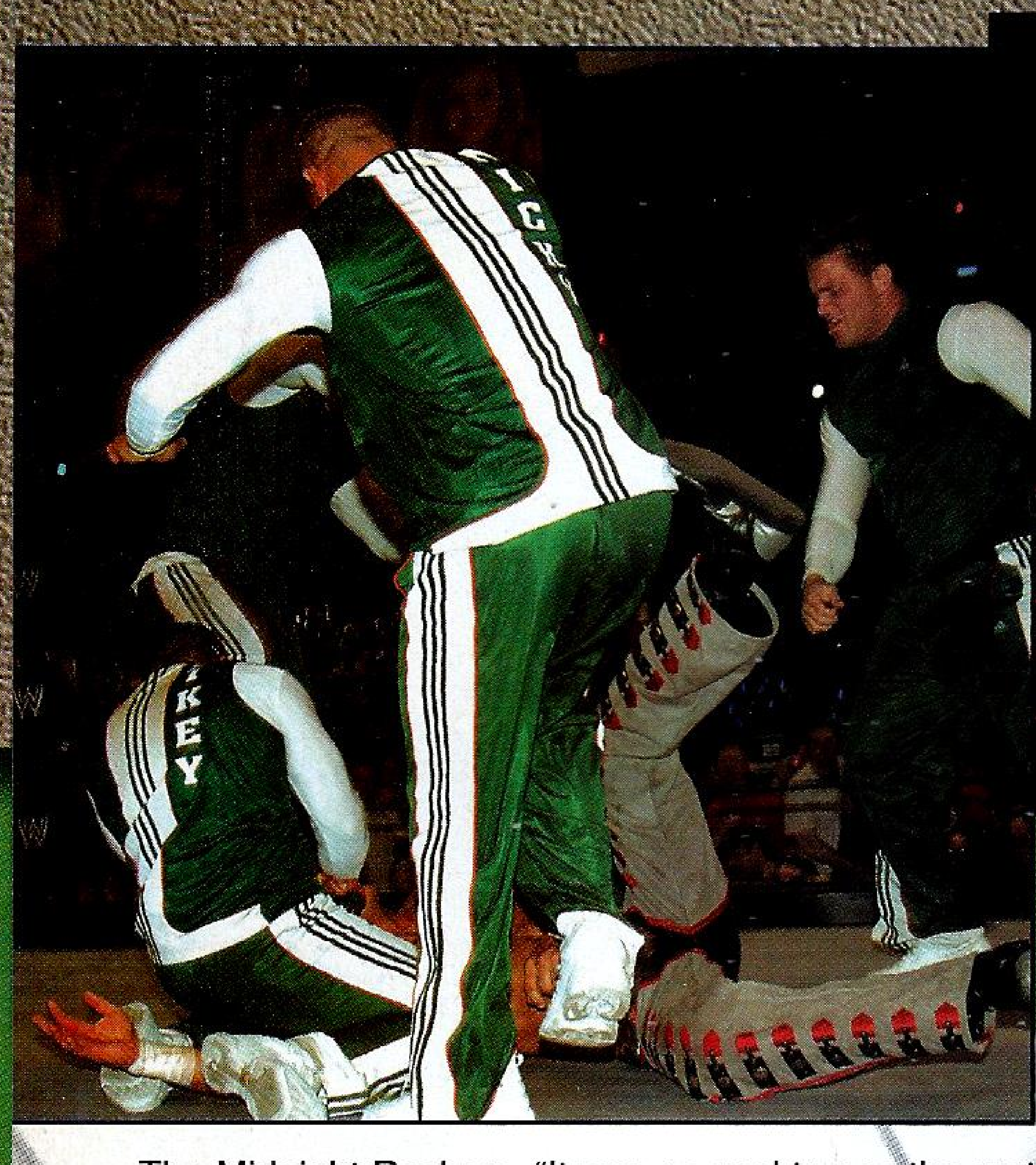
Call it "Re-Generation-X," if you will. WWE, it seems, may soon be shaken to its core by a new infusion of some original attitude from De-Generation X. Or, on the other hand, perhaps two of the cagiest connivers in the wrestling business could be secretly setting up one other—and everyone else in wrestling—for the mother of all swerves.

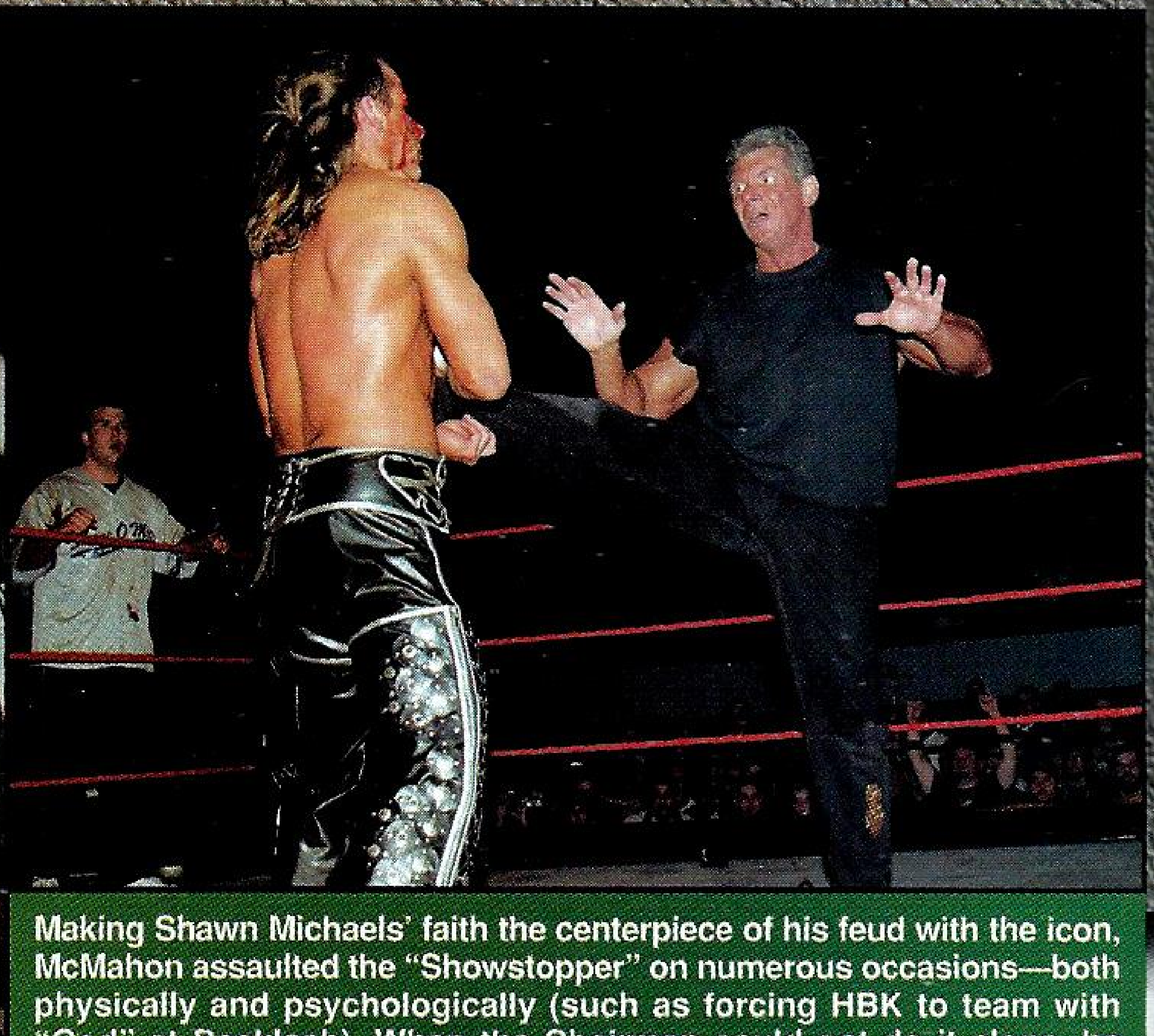
History has shown that the only predictable element of the rocky and violent relationship between Shawn Michaels and Triple-H is its unpredictability.

Flash back to WrestleMania 22, when Michaels stood perched atop a perilously tall ladder, Mr. McMahon's battered and bloodied body stuffed inside a trash can and draped across a wooden table below. Michaels, a proud born-again Christian who has been known to make the sign of the cross before making dangerous leaps of faith from ladders, did something different this time. He taunted McMahon with a crotch chop, a gesture he hasn't made, at least in front of wrestling audiences, since just before Mike Tyson clocked the former degenerate after his WrestleMania XIV WWF title loss to "Stone Cold" Steve Austin.

Many who saw the gesture, though delighted by the its sudden reappearance in Michaels' repertoire, wondered if he had delivered it almost reflexively—just a spur-of-the-moment whim fueled by adrenaline and nostalgia.

"When he crotch-chopped from the top of that huge ladder, I was like, 'That's awesome!'" marveled ringside spectator Trixie Garcia, who has closely followed Michaels' career since his days in





Making Shawn Michaels' faith the centerpiece of his feud with the icon, McMahon assaulted the "Showstopper" on numerous occasions—both physically and psychologically (such as forcing HBK to team with "God" at Backlash). When the Chairman could not do it alone, he enlisted hit men such as son Shane and the hated Spirit Squad (left).

The Midnight Rockers. "It was so cool to see the crotch chop again, especially since he directed it right at that [expletive deleted] jerk Mr. McMahon. But I figured he was just having fun, or maybe he was a bit punch-drunk or something. I didn't think Shawn was making a big statement or anything. But then, when he did it again to Shane McMahon, I was like, 'Whoa, something's definitely going on here.'"

When Michaels then added injury to insult by dropping a devastating elbow through Mr. McMahon and the table, a memorable WrestleMania moment seemed etched in wrestling history. But the intriguing moment was far from over. Neither Garcia, nor any other spectator in Chicago or around the world that night, could have predicted what would happen later in the event.

Triple-H—in the middle of an unprecedented career downslide—loomed over a flattened John Cena during the epic main event battle for the Raw World title and unleashed a brazen crotch chop of his own. The audience immediately erupted into chants of "D-X! D-X!" What may have started as a crowd-pleasing gesture in Michaels' match had suddenly become the makings of a revolution.

Even the most skeptical observers, who had long believed that a reconciliation between Michaels and Triple-H was as likely as Eugene winning a Nobel Prize, wondered if WWE's most irrepressible faction of the late-'90s would be reborn.

Could Michaels and Triple-H have spilled enough of each other's blood during their violent battles to have reached some sort of profound understanding? Or was each using the crotch chop merely to gain the other's trust, only to strike again, both physically and psychologically?

There are some clues, but few solid answers.

The next night on *Raw* and in the weeks that followed, both Michaels and Triple-H made several thinly veiled allusions to a possible reuniting of DX. "The Game's" crotch-chopping continued, while Michaels invited a packed arena to deliver, in unison, two very familiar words to Mr. McMahon.

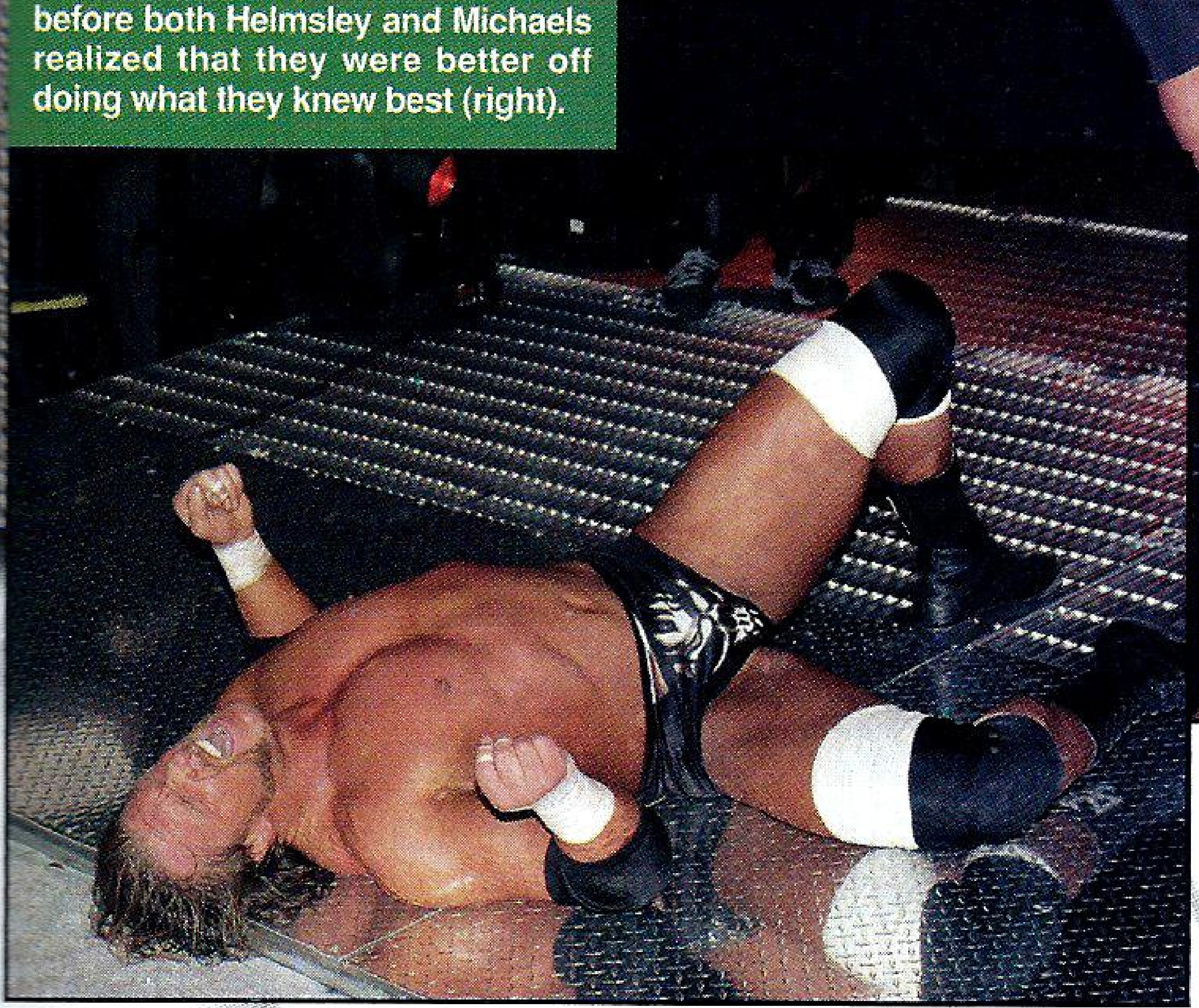
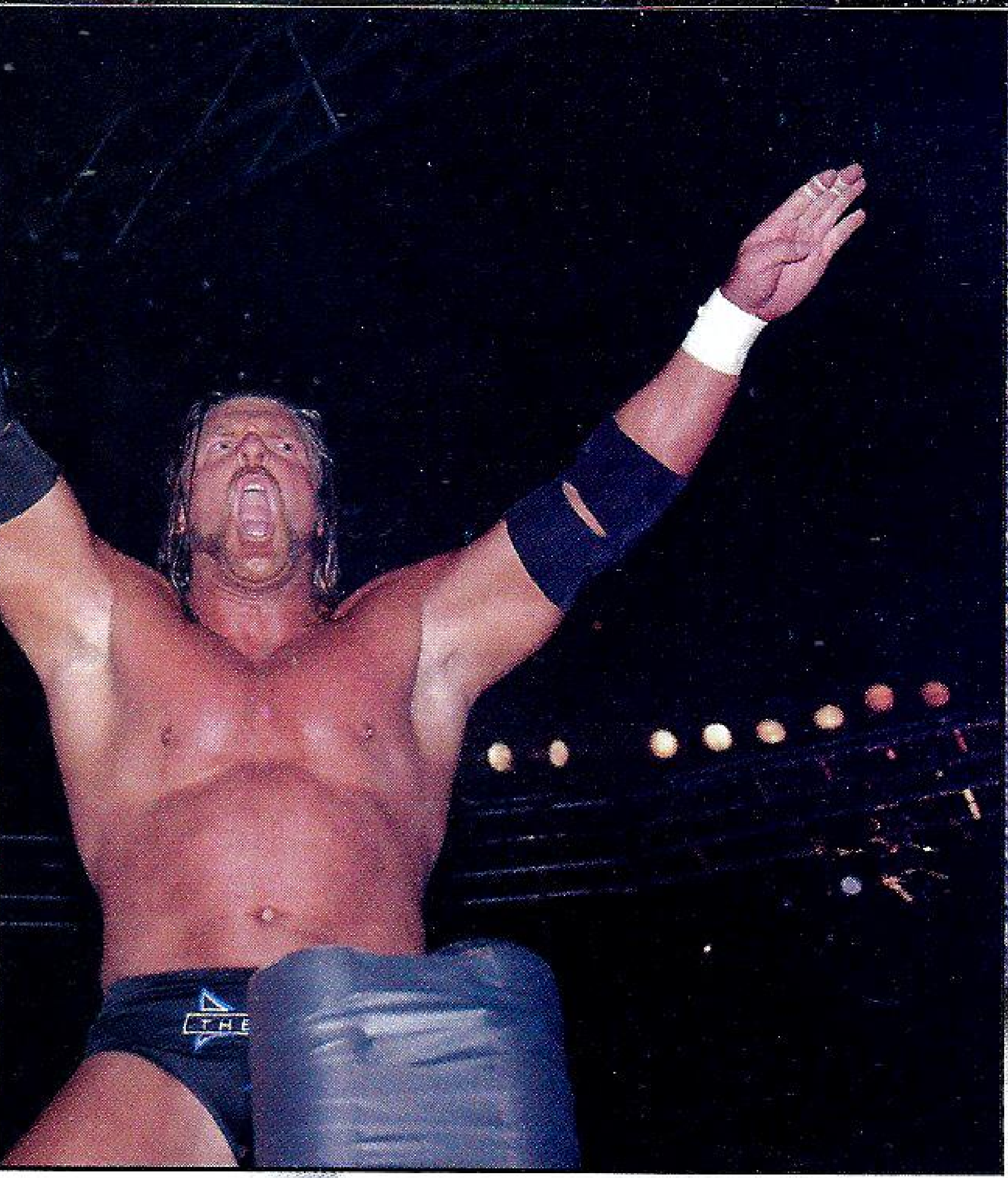
Therein may lay the missing piece of the puzzle—Mr. McMahon. If any factor could be considered the catalyst for Michaels and Triple-H to bury the hatchet and galvanize a reunion of DeGeneration X, it might be their mutual distrust and distaste for the Chairman. Both Michaels and Triple-H have enjoyed good working relationships—even personal ties—to McMahon in the past, only to be double-crossed by the boss in the end.

Sources close to McMahon say he used to be driven into fits of rage in the WWF boardroom over the anti-authority ethos of DX during the faction's late-1990s heyday. If the "Heartbreak Kid" and "The Game" can agree on anything, it's that making McMahon furious is always time well-spent. The key to this reunion very well could lie with Mr. McMahon who has undoubtedly brought both men to the breaking point over the first half of the year.

Had McMahon been able to check his massive ego and embrace one of the two men, the budding insurgence might have been avoided. All it would have taken would have been for McMahon to play to one of the men's weaknesses—Hunter's lust for titles or HBK's desire to cement his legacy—rather than engage in an ill-conceived and desperate attempt to destroy each. Inadvertently, the chairman awoke a sleeping giant and now must deal with the ramifications of two legendary superstars sharing the common purpose of making his life miserable.

Or, conversely, were these two embattled superstars playing off the other's misery to build a temporary alliance, with no real desire of a long-term reunion?

A member of the WWE ring crew, who spoke to *The Wrestler* under the condition of anonymity, had a



McMahon's tactics with Triple-H were more physical than mental, as he placed "The Game" in intentionally unfair situations—such as a triple-threat feud with Edge and Cena and handicap matches with The Spirit Squad (below) where he always came out worse for the wear. It was only a matter of time before both Helmsley and Michaels realized that they were better off doing what they knew best (right).

unique perspective at WrestleMania—crouched just beside the ring, managing camera wires.

According to him, Michaels uttered something while gasping for breath after crashing through McMahon and the table. "Shawn turned his head toward the entrance ramp, like he was looking toward the locker room, and he said, 'See that, Trips?' It's like he was dedicating that crotch chop to 'The Game.'"

Some other observers, however, don't buy it.

"I was standing beside the ring, about two feet away from Michaels," said George Napolitano, who photographed the card for THE WRESTLER. "Michaels didn't say, 'See that, Trips?' What he actually said was, 'Suck it, Trips.'"

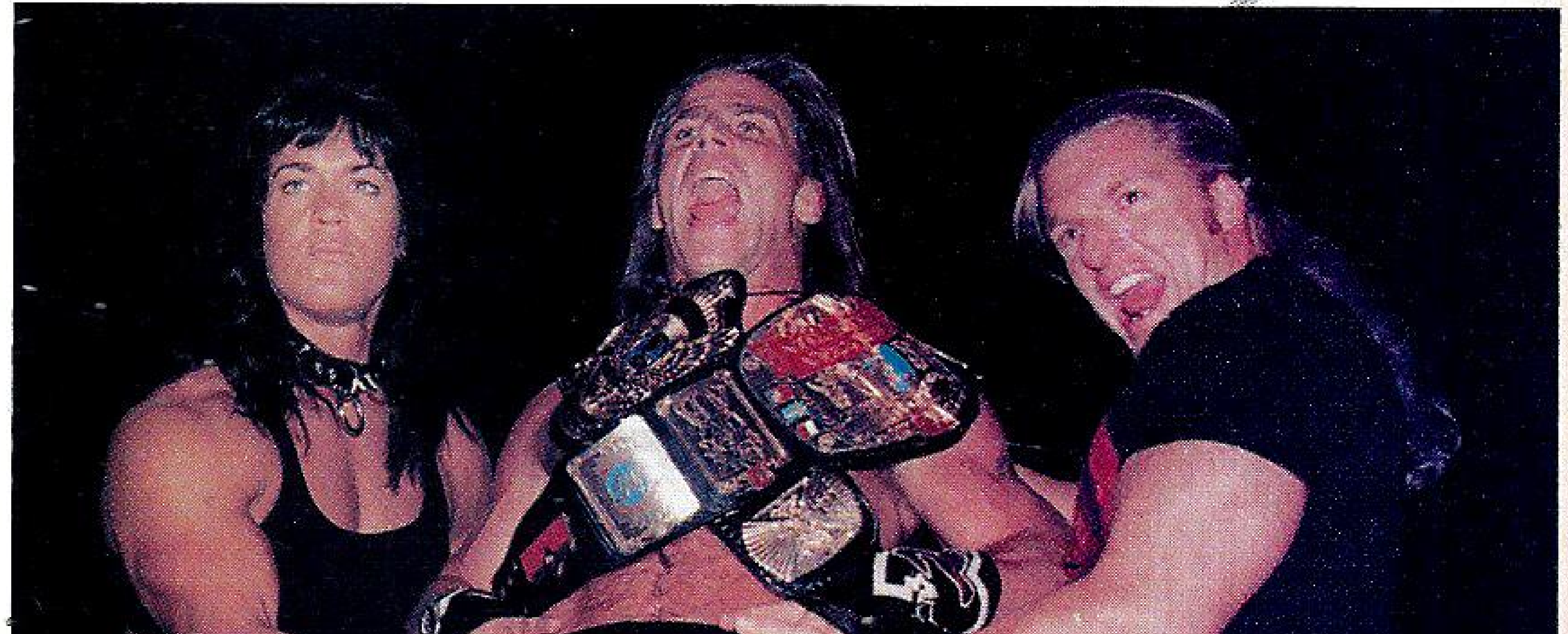
The TV cameras, unfortunately, were focused on Mr. McMahon's demolished body at the time of Michaels' alleged utterance, so the pay-per-view audience was not privy to what HBK may or may not have said.

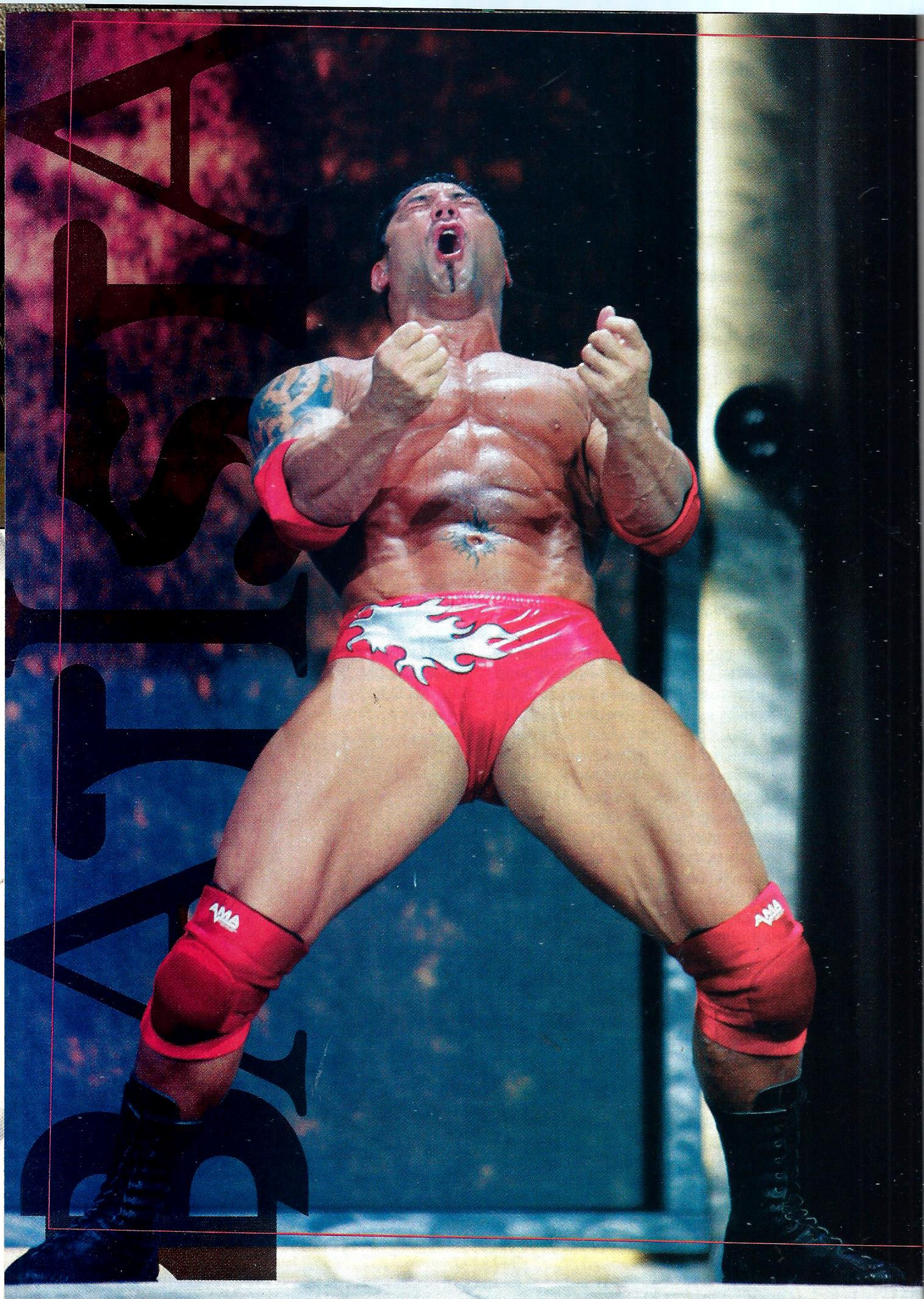
The conflicting accounts—if they have any truth—paint two very different pictures of Michaels' intentions with his crotch chop. Regardless of Michaels' intended meaning, however, Triple-H was quick to reciprocate the gesture in his war with Cena. And his crotch chop, regardless of what he meant by it, was undoubtedly delivered with gusto.

The truth may never come to light, although it appears—at least in the interim—that the latest incarnation of DeGeneration X is a product of necessity. The common goal: destroy Mr. McMahon at all costs, and buck the system in the process. In the end, McMahon may have no one but himself to blame for the ramifications.

Both Triple-H and Michaels have been evasive when asked by wrestling media about the motivations behind their uses of DX's signature gesture. Both declined comment for this article. Instead, each faxed short written statements regarding the crotch chops to the THE WRESTLER's office.

Interestingly, both statements said the exact same thing: "Actions speak louder than words." ☐


Can a 2006 edition of DX be as influential as it was in 1998? No one is sure. The only thing we can be sure of is this: If HBK and HHH are going to try to make life miserable for Vince McMahon, they're going to have to do it without Chyna.


BATISTA
AMA
AMA

REMEMBER HOW CLOSE BATISTA AND REY MISTERIO JR. BECAME AFTER THE DEATH OF A CLOSE FRIEND? BATISTA DOES. HE WASN'T ABLE TO DO MUCH TO HELP WHEN HIS FRIEND TOOK MANY A BEATING AFTER WINNING THE SMACKDOWN WORLD TITLE. BUT HE'S VERY ABLE AND VERY READY NOW!

“BIG BROTHER”

BATISTA

BATISTA

“ANYBODY WHO ABUSED REY WILL PAY!”

By Dave Lenker

Photos by George Napolitano

THE LOOKS ON the faces of the few folks who had chosen to linger deep in the bowels of the arena more than two hours after the mid-May *Smackdown* taping had ended might as well have suggested to Batista that he had just sprouted a second head that had seven eyes, three noses, and four ears on it. As he spilled a stack of videotapes onto a table next to a monitor hooked up to an ancient-looking VCR, “The Animal” offered one of his famous knowing smirks and uttered just a single word.

“What?”

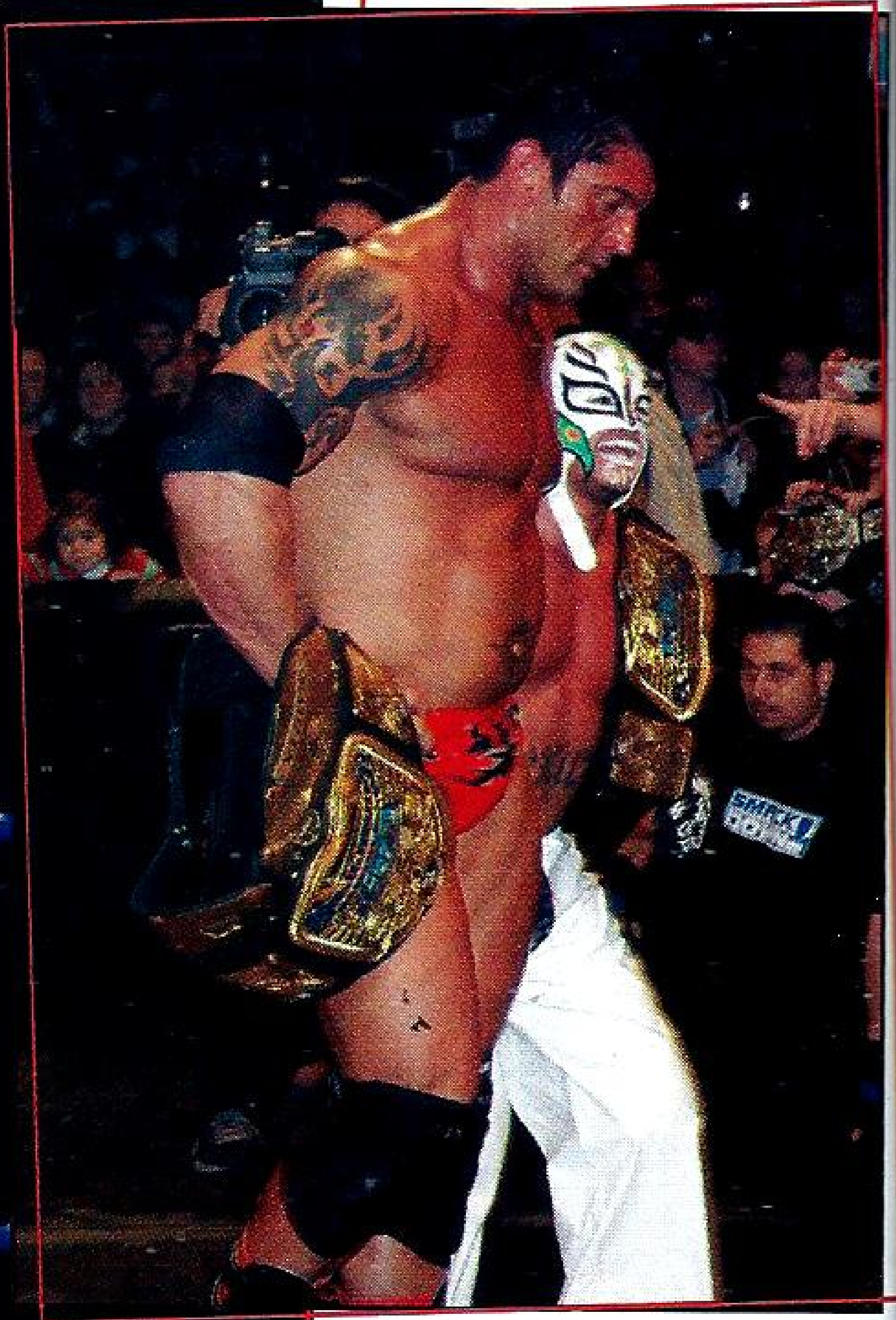
“Just never took you for a guy who studied a lot of tape, big man,” said one arena worker.

“Bet you never took me for a guy who would beat Triple-H one … two … three times in a row on pay-per-view, either,” he responded with a flash of fingers.

“Guess it never hurts to study up on the guys you'll be facing soon enough, huh? It's been, what, six months since you've been in the ring? A lot of the Smackdown guys have added a lot of new wrinkles since you went out. Maybe they should start calling you ‘The Cerebral Assassin.’”

Batista laughed, but the smile quickly faded from his face. “I don't know about

Batista has the back of his pint-sized friend, Rey Misterio Jr. While recuperating from his triceps injury, "The Animal" stocked up on motivation to retaliate against those who wronged Misterio during his title reign.



Batista and Misterio once dominated for a short period of time as the Smackdown tag team champions. The brotherhood they formed at that time is still strong despite the time Batista spent away from the ring.

that," he said. "Besides, I'm not really studying opponents tonight. I'd call these more like motivational tapes."

* * *

Before you get to thinking that Batista has become a disciple of Tony Robbins or some other famous motivational speaker in the time since injuries forced him to relinquish the World title belt back in January, you should know that the tapes Batista watched on this night were, indeed, full of action from *Smackdown* television broadcasts and pay-per-views from the last three months or so.

His official reason for showing up at the *Smackdown* taping that night was to visit some friends and have a few brief and informal meetings with WWE officials regarding what was then his impending return to action. His unofficial (and perhaps more important) reason for showing up? To pick up tapes that he had a WWE employee make for him.

* * *

As he used the remote control to fast-forward to the first *Smackdown* segment on the second tape that he so desperately wanted to see, Batista paced just like, well, a caged animal.

"Do you believe this guy gets away with saying this stuff? He never gets tired of hearing his own voice, does he? Thinks he's real damn funny, too. I'll show him funny."

On the screen was JBL, of course, delivering the kind of anti-Hispanic rhetoric that he'd been spewing since he began feuding with Eddie Guerrero just after WrestleMania XX. Over the next few moments, Batista

The death of Eddie Guerrero brought the masked luchador and the brawny giant closer. They bonded as brothers and tag team partners, fighting for the honor of their late friend.

watched closely, winced, and fumed as JBL handed Misterio a hellacious beating.

"Have you not seen these matches before?" he was asked.

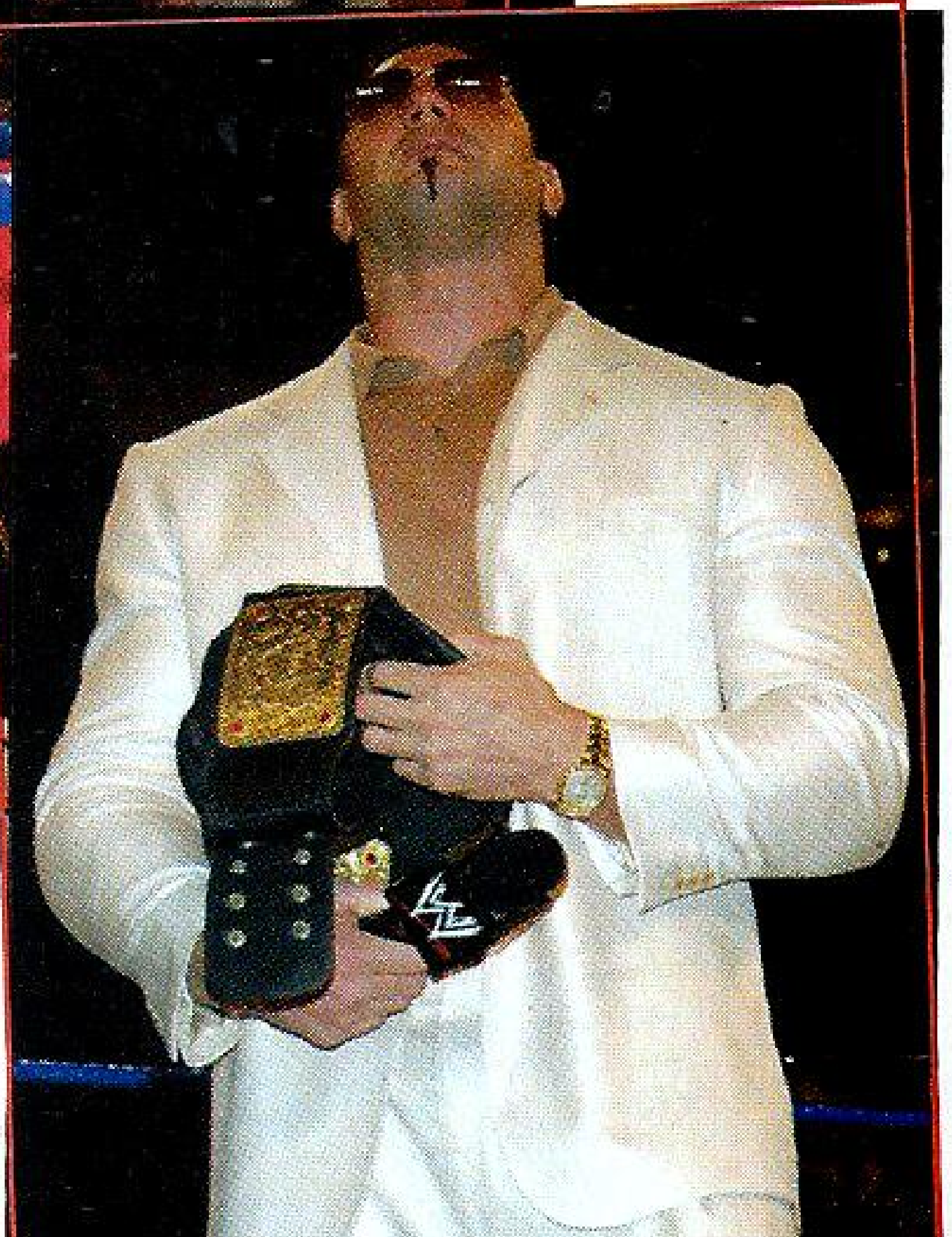
"No, I've seen this all before," he said softly. "Like I said, think of these as motivational tapes for me. Anybody who abused Rey will pay! I'd make a list if I had to, but each one of them is pretty much burned into my memory by now. Anybody who abused Rey while I was out will pay. *Anybody.*"

* * *

Surprisingly to some, the list is rather extensive. When Misterio made most of us feel all warm and fuzzy inside by capturing the Smackdown World title against all odds in a three-way match at April's WrestleMania 22 in Chicago, the prevailing theory was that the significantly undersized Luchador's reign would go one of two ways: Either it would end quickly (perhaps within a few weeks), or Vince McMahon would get behind him fully, and he'd show that a great little man could beat some very good big (and medium-sized) men.

It hasn't followed either of those paths. No, instead, clean non-title losses have become the order of the day. In fact, many an informed observer has noted that no fan favorite world champion has looked so vulnerable and beatable since the days of ... well, maybe ever. Misterio's record on house shows has been outstanding, but not only has JBL gotten the best of him in a televised match, so have Mark Henry, Rob Van Dam, and The (not-so) Great Khali. We're talking clean pinfall wins here. Hell, even Finlay has pinned him on TV!

Who can forget the image of Khali simply putting a foot on top of Rey's battered body and scoring a pin in a non-title match. It was reminiscent of the handicap squash matches Andre the Giant would occasionally wrestle on WWF TV decades ago. But this was the Smackdown World champion getting crushed.



When Batista gave up the belt at a January *Smackdown* taping, Batista clearly stated that the title winner would merely hold the belt until he himself returned to reclaim it, leaving many to wonder what would happen if Misterio claimed the belt.

It only served to make Misterio look weak—and get his "big brother" very, very angry.

Lest you forget, Misterio and Batista formed quite the emotional bond after the tragic death of Eddie Guerrero last November. They not only became friends, but, ever so briefly, Smackdown tag team champions. Their clashing styles made for a spectacular partnership, so much so that "The Animal" was able to juggle rather deftly defenses of both his tag belt and his Smackdown World title. Then injury struck him again *(see sidebar, page 56).* Although Batista only appeared occasionally at Smackdown shows during his rehabilitation, the bond between him and Misterio only grew stronger.

"I think I was the first guy to congratulate him backstage when he won the belt at WrestleMania," Batista said. "But when everything eventually quieted down that night and all the parties wound down, I took him aside. I told him he's gotta really watch his back, and he's gotta start watching it right now. You have no idea how much of a target you become when you're a world champion.

"Rey's done great as champion, as far as I'm concerned. Sometimes he's had everything working against him, but he never complains, and, last I checked, that eight pounds of gold was still with him. If you don't mind me borrowing a line from a certain other superstar—that's the bottom line."

* * *

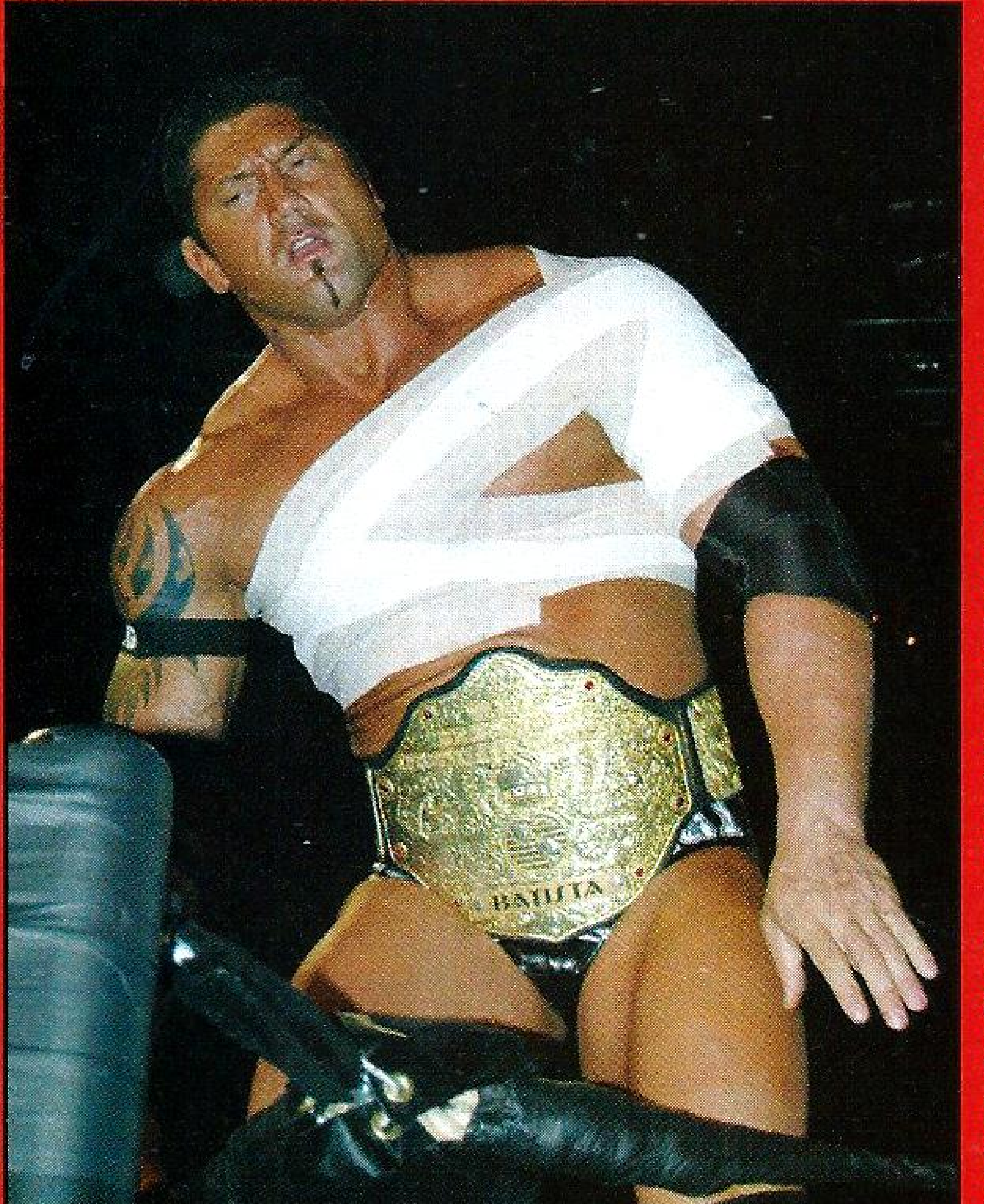
As he finally started to make his way out of the arena and toward his rental car, Batista made sure he took his tapes that with him. "Think I'll take another look at some of these once I get back to my hotel," he said. "I don't think I'm angry enough yet, but I'm getting there. I want to have just enough anger stored up when I finally get cleared to step into that ring again. These guys who want to get laughs at Rey's expense or who get off on beating on him aren't going to be laughing much longer."

Alas, there was one more fairly major issue that needed to be addressed before the night was over. It had everything to do with what Batista said when he was forced to give up "his" title during the cold winter months.

Didn't he tell everyone that the title belt (which ended up around the waist of Kurt Angle when he won a battle royal for the title on the very night it was vacated) would simply be on loan to whoever held it when he returned? Won't this hit list he has compiled distract him from his primary goal—

CAN BIG DAVE SHAKE THE INJURY BUG?

While Batista figures out whether he wants to avenge the wrongs done to his "little brother" Rey or pursue the Smackdown World title first, we're here to suggest that he place something else atop his list of priorities: staying healthy for an extended period of time!



The spirit is willing, but can the flesh catch up?

It was January 12, 2006, two days after he handed the World title belt over to Smackdown General Manager Theodore Long, when big Dave went under the surgeon's knife to have his torn right triceps muscle repaired. Re-repaired, actually. It was only four days earlier that Batista tore the muscle during a World title match with clumsy contender Mark Henry, whom many blamed for the injury.

Batista must have felt he was cursed when he felt that muscle rip.

Why? Because it was only two months earlier that he tore a muscle in his back when, in the middle of a mini Raw vs. Smackdown interbrand war, he took a devastating double-choke-slam from Raw's Big Show and Kane during a *Smackdown* taping. It was widely assumed during the days following the attack that Batista would be forced to give up the gold. However, knowing that he wouldn't be guaranteed a return trip to WWE's penthouse upon his return, Batista chose to deal with the pain and forge ahead. He was able to cut back on his ring time when he and Misterio captured tag team gold together.

Perhaps overcompensation for the back injury in some way contributed to the triceps injury, or perhaps the excessive musculature that "The Animal" carries on his 6'6", 318-pound frame had something to do with it. Whatever the case, it meant about five months on the disabled list for Batista.

He's been there before.

Thirty-three nights after Evolution was born in January 2003, the group's sculpted enforcer tore his triceps at a house show during a tag team match in which he and Randy Orton battled The Dudley Boyz. As bad luck would have it, Orton also injured his ankle during the match, so Evolution's manpower was cut in half (temporarily) during one dark night in Reading, Pennsylvania.

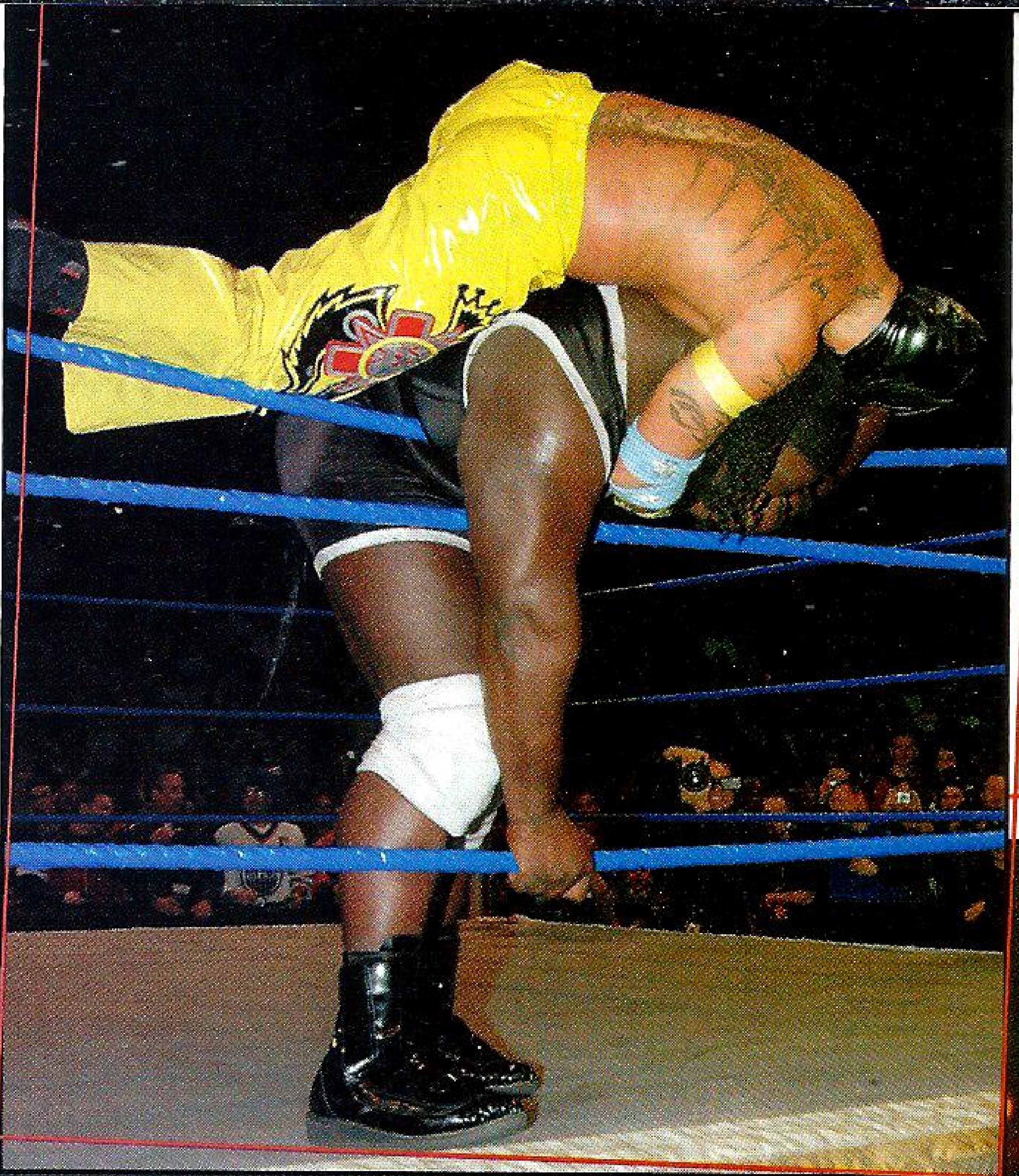
His rehab progressed well … before he re-tore the muscle while, of all things, jogging with his wife, Angie. It would be more than five months before Batista would return to the ring this time, and Evolution could be reborn.

It's nearly impossible to predict whether Batista will be able to keep his triceps and other prominent muscles intact for a very extended stretch this time. He started in professional wrestling a little too late in life to have to lose all this time to injuries.

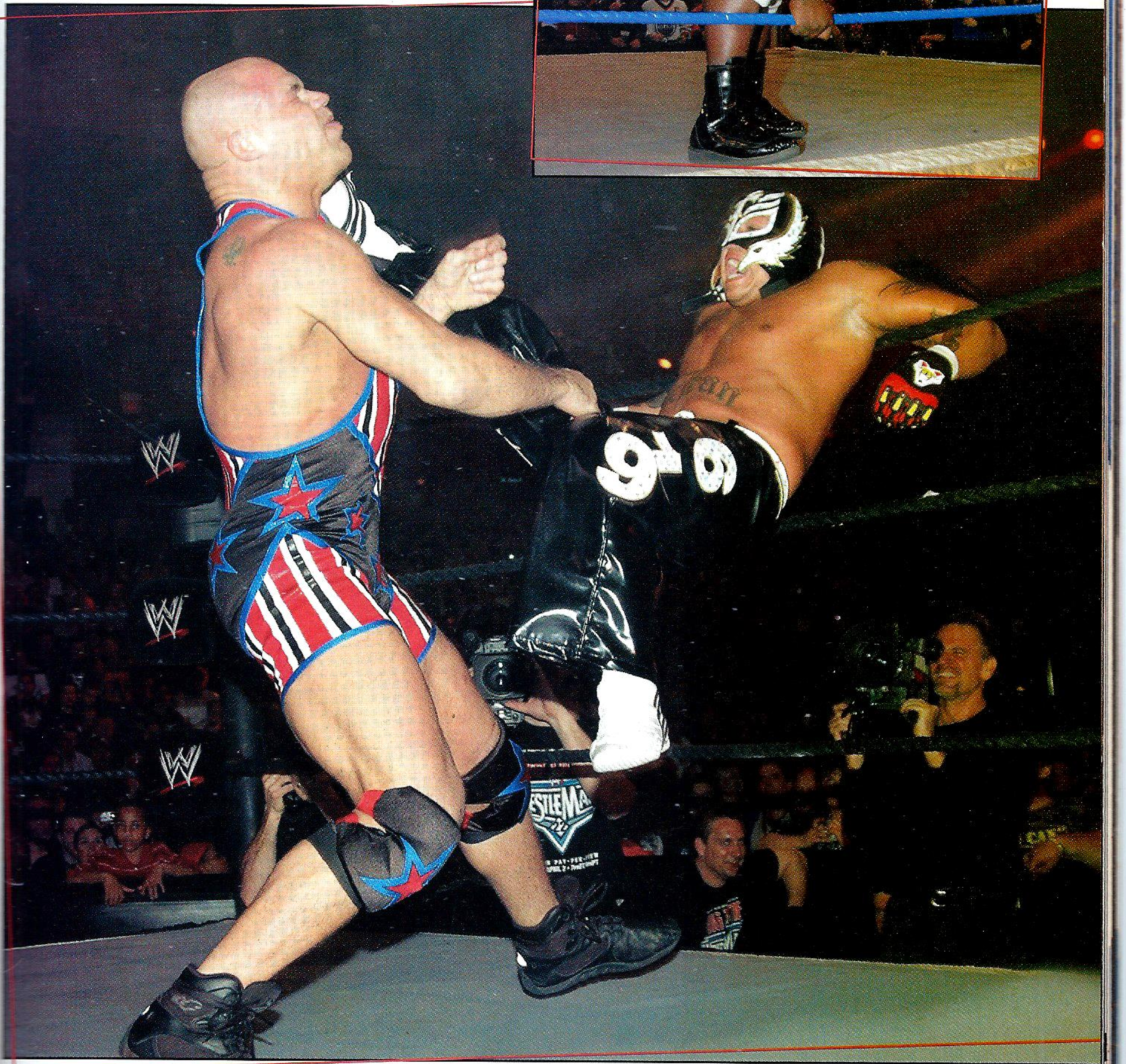
—Dave Lenker

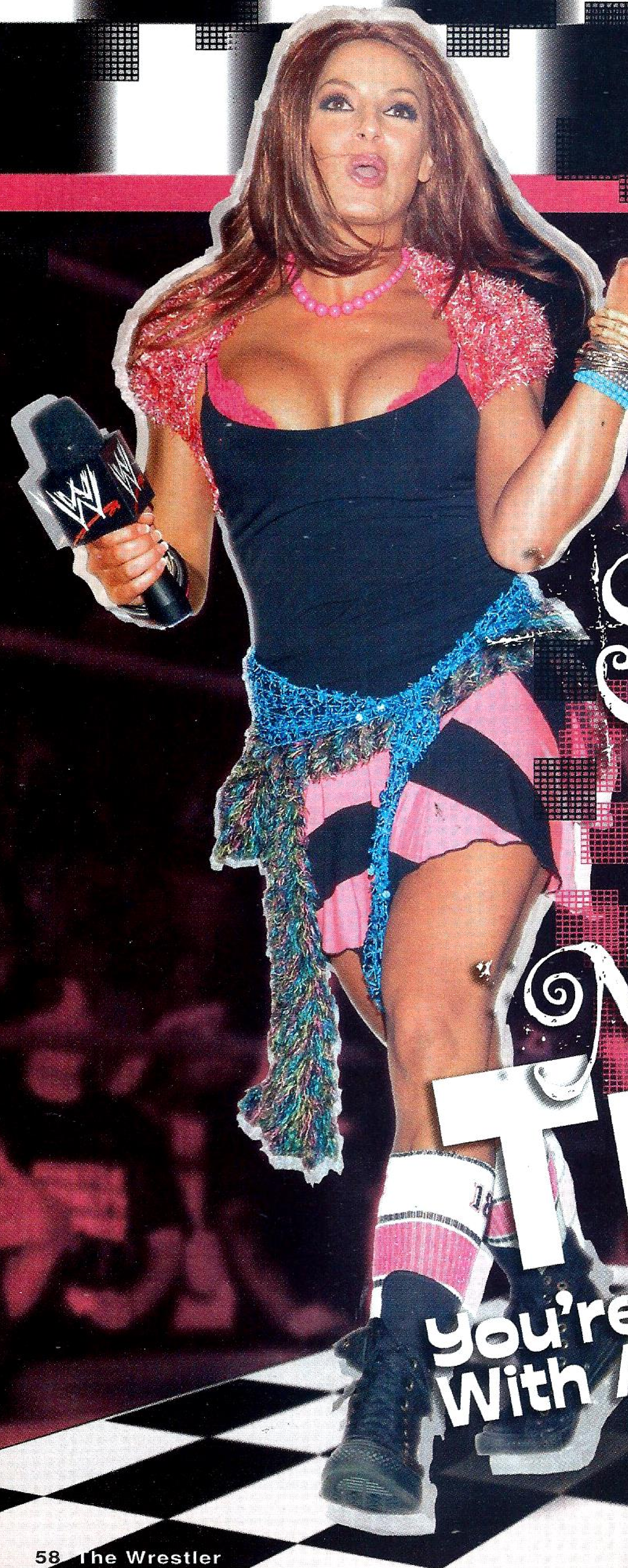
which would involve him going after his buddy?

"Guess I need to watch what I say sometimes," Batista responded. "You people remember these things. Let me just put it this way. I said I told Rey you always gotta watch your back when you're a world champion. They'll be coming at you from every angle. But some guys, the guys who do things the right way, come at you straight ahead, like a man. I'm one of the guys who likes to do things the right way." □



Misterio offered a heart-warming sentiment to Batista when he forfeited his belt: Rey-Rey would fight the battle royal for his wounded comrade. Although Misterio fought valiantly at the battle royal, he was eliminated by the massive Mark Henry (right). But Misterio came out on top at WrestleMania 22 against Kurt Angle and Randy Orton, taking home the title (below).





After losing the women's championship to Mickie James, Trish Stratus resorted to many of her stalker's tactics in an effort to regain the psychological advantage. James appeared on *Raw* bearing a striking resemblance to her fallen idol and—naturally—Trish was happy to return the favor, much to the champ's chagrin.

Stay Away from Mickie, TRiSH!

You're Playing Chess With A Madwoman!

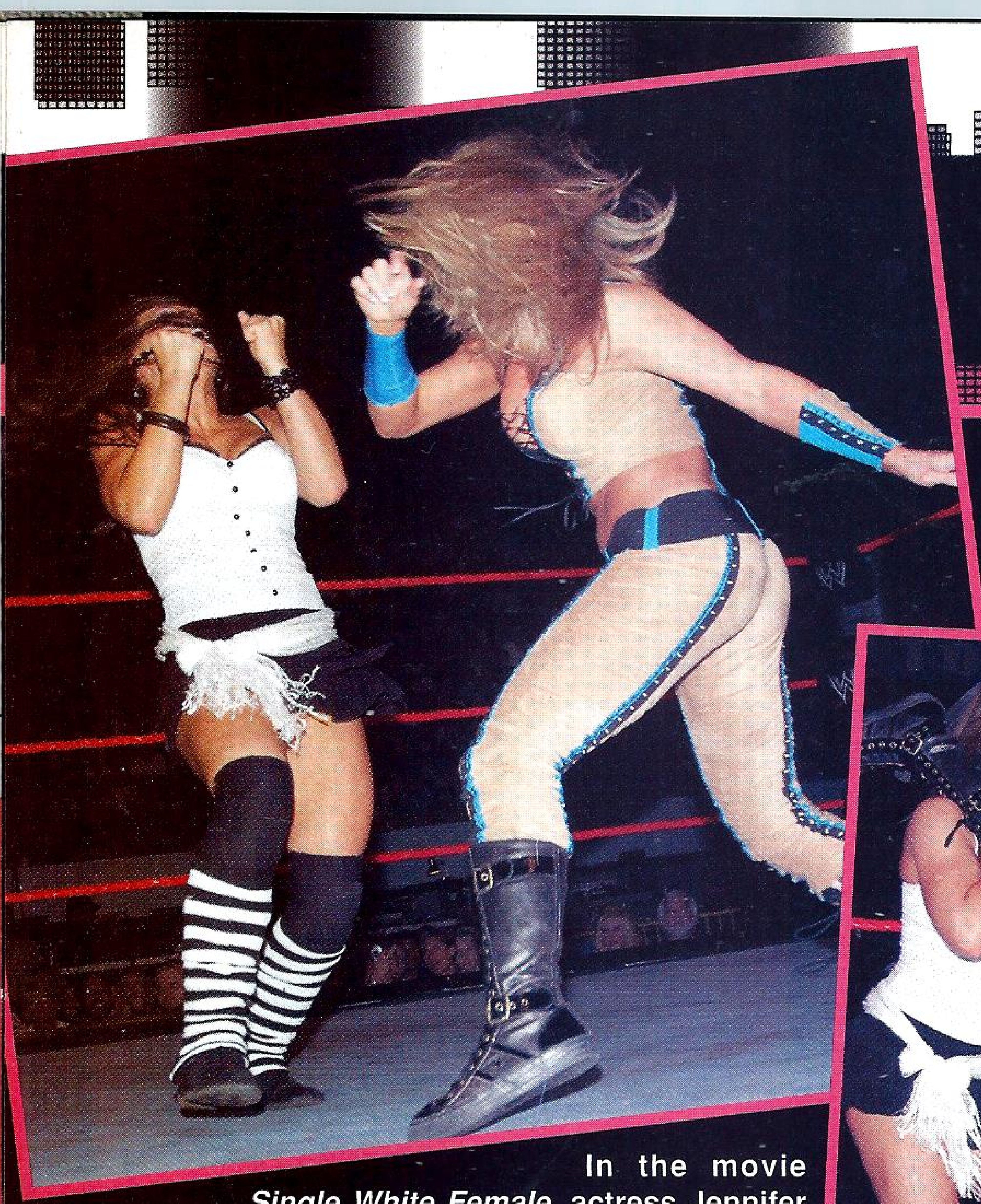
Trish Stratus was on top of the WWE women's division for so long that she may have forgotten what it was like to be the hunter and not the hunted. Now, she's embroiled in a dangerous feud, and her next move could be her last

WOMEN'S CHAMPION

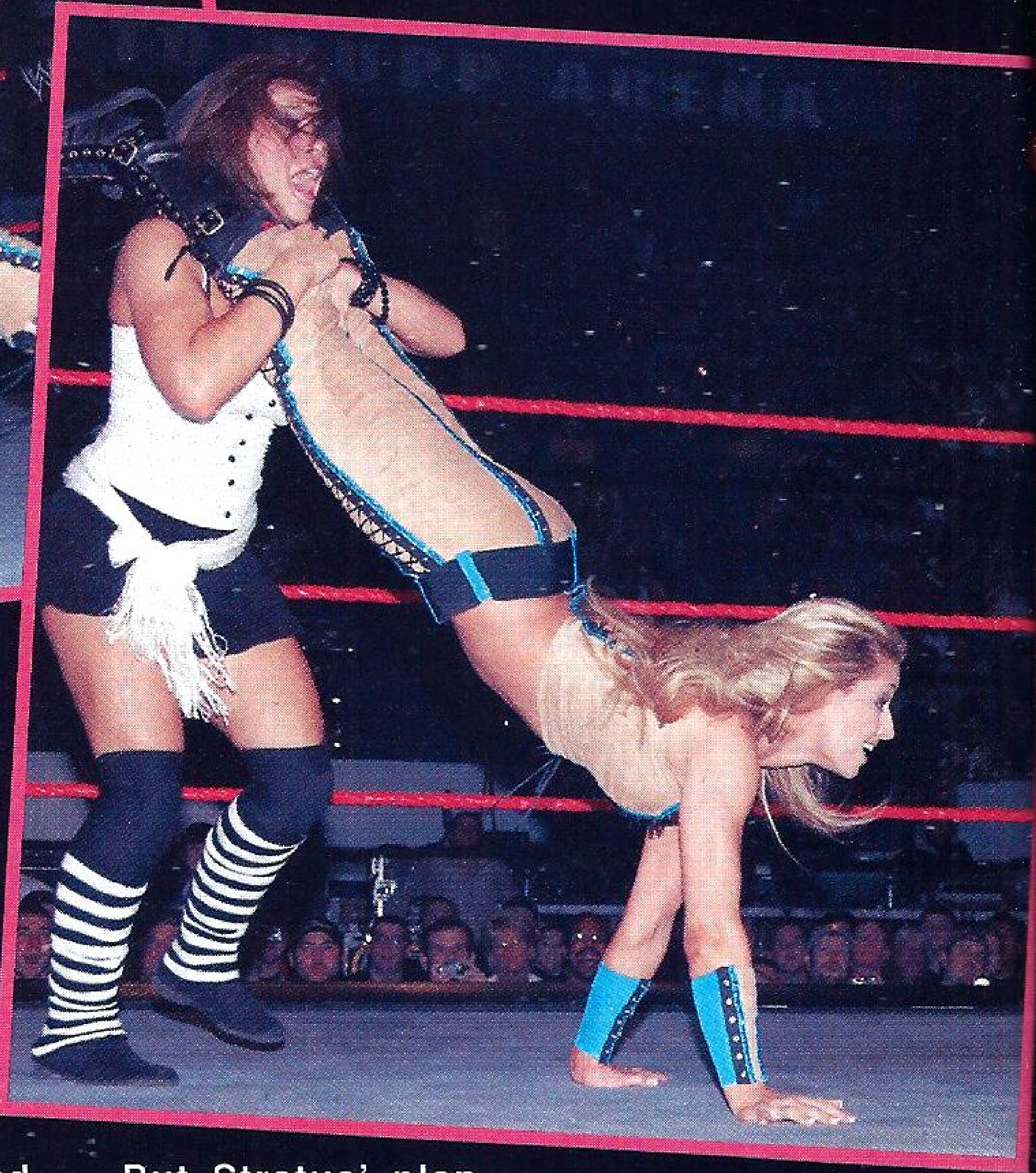
By Bill Meltzer

IN A RELATIONSHIP that can best be described as Zbyszko and Sammartino meets *Single White Female*, Mickie James posed a serious threat to Trish Stratus from the minute she entered a WWE ring. James' slow descent from rabid Trish Stratus supporter to an obsessive and dangerous stalker is well-documented. Fans everywhere could see James slowly turning from Trish's biggest fan to her worst nightmare. Obsessions drive people to do dangerous things, especially in pro wrestling.

In the aforementioned case of Larry Zbyszko, the obsessive—and utterly baseless—belief that friend and mentor Bruno Sammartino was trying to sabotage his career by keeping him under his thumb caused the once mild-mannered fan favorite to brutally assault "Da Brune" and bestow his trademark moniker—"The Living Legend"—on himself.



Trish looked to be in control of Mickie—in both the ring and in the champ's head—during their rematch at Backlash in April. The challenger's psychological strike appeared to have worked, as Trish seemed poised to reclaim the women's title.



In the movie *Single White Female,* actress Jennifer Jason Leigh's character admires her roommate so much that she adopts her mannerisms, changes her wardrobe and appearance, and even "borrows" her roommate's boyfriend. Her admiration of—and thinly veiled attraction to—her roommate turns to violent hatred after her advances are, expectedly, rebuffed.

Sound familiar?

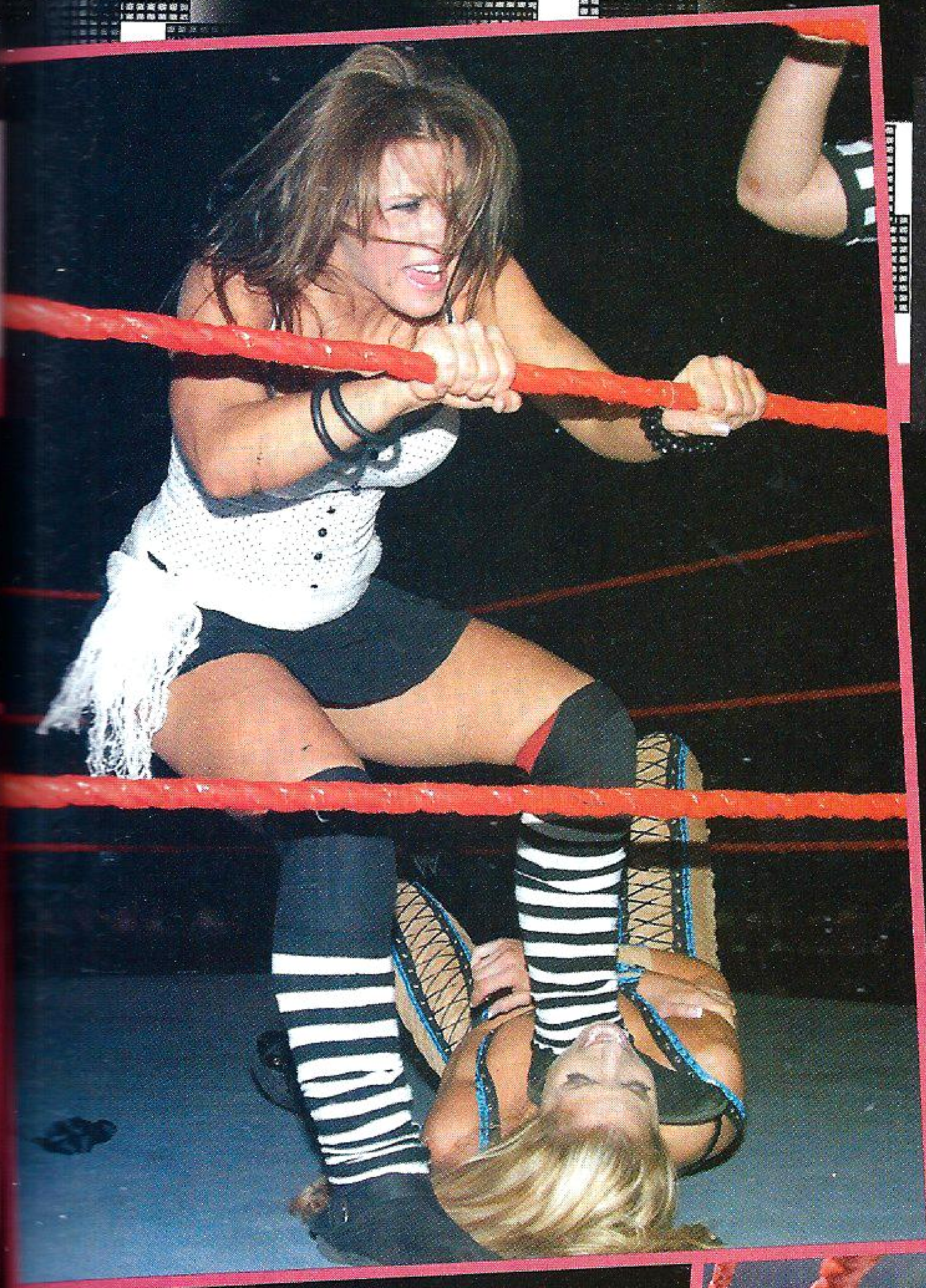
Mickie James went through an even more drastic metamorphosis in mere months. James shifted rapidly from Trish's fan to her protectorate to an all-too-eager-to-please pupil, and finally to her jilted would-be "lover." The signs were there from the start. In fact, the only one who couldn't see where James' obsession was headed was Stratus herself. Even before James revealed her true insanity and brutalized Stratus at *Saturday Night's Main Event*, fans serenaded the eclectic James with chants of "psycho."

Defeated in the ring for the first time in over a year and stalked and assaulted by James on a regular basis, Stratus concocted a plot to regain her title and drive James out of WWE: She'd intentionally provoke James' fingernails-on-a-chalkboard screeches and emotional meltdowns by engaging in psychological warfare with her. By turning the tables on James, Trish hoped she'd push Mickie so far over the edge that the new champion would be ripe for the picking.

But Stratus' plan was extremely risky at best, dangerously foolhardy at worst. Quite simply, as Trish attempted to match Mickie crazy move for crazy move, she fell deeper and deeper into a battle she couldn't possibly win.

"Trish is every bit as brave as she is beautiful and talented, but, I have to say, I think she's going about battling Mickie James the wrong way," former women's champion Wendi Richter said recently. "I learned that same lesson the hard way in my own career. I never should have tried to guess what The Fabulous Moolah would pull next. She got into my head. If I stuck to just wrestling her, I would have been champion much longer; the same thing with Stratus. If she wrestles Mickie, she's got a good shot at getting her belt back soon. If she plays mind games with her, I don't like Trish's chances."

To be fair, Stratus won the early psychological bat-



Unfortunately for Trish. Mickie was able to use the rules to her advantage, keeping the title via disqualification and injuring the challenger in the process. This setback forced Trish to up the ante a bit and take their feud to a potentially explosive new level.

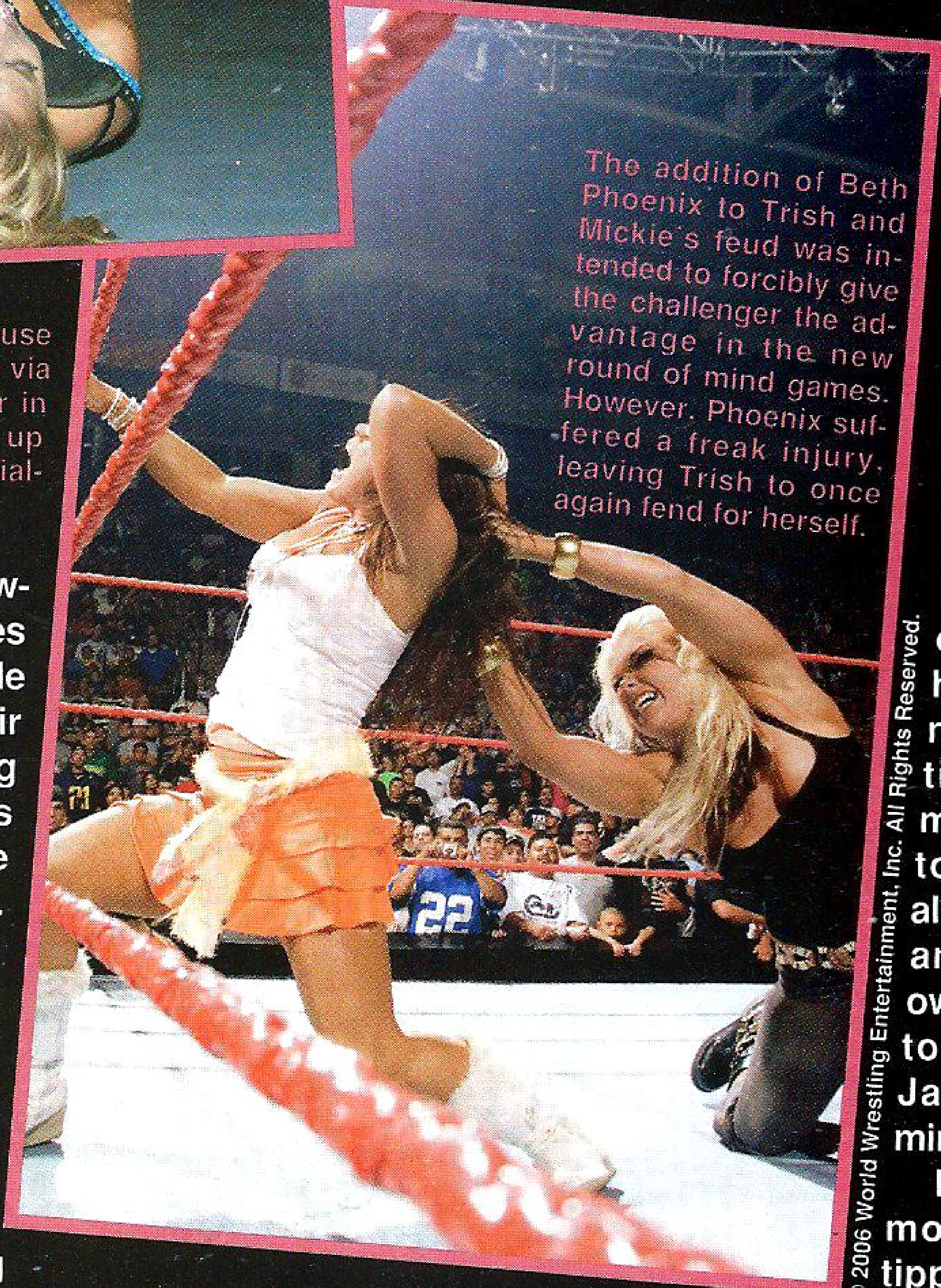
tles in the weeks immediately following WrestleMania. She caught James off-guard by reversing the stalker role and appearing as Mickie (brown hair and all) to combat James appearing dressed as Trish. As predicted, this role reversal drove Mickie into the tantrums that Trish was banking on. But, James quickly regrouped and started taking a perverse delight in her war of attrition with Stratus.

The casualties have already started to mount. In one especially intense bout with James, Stratus dislocated her shoulder, landing on the sidelines for six weeks. Upping the ante even further, Stratus recruited a beautiful, yet dangerous ally in Beth Phoenix to battle James.

The only reason Beth agreed to come was that she, too, has a long-standing rivalry of her own with Mickie. Phoenix, in fact, wrestled her first career match against James in 2000. The two later clashed again in the Louisville-based OVW territory until James made her WWE debut in October 2005.

The Phoenix-Stratus alliance has seemed to be on shaky ground from the get-go, seeming only one communication mix-up away from a blowup. Faced with the pressure and tension of having both Mickie and Trish at ringside during a match with Victoria, Phoenix tried to be perfect with every move. In the process, she suffered a broken jaw on a rollup attempt. The injury required surgery, forcing Phoenix—Stratus' insurance policy—out of action for about two months.

"Good! I'm so sick of both of them following me around!" shrieked James. Then she calmed down momentarily. "Trish, I still don't know why you hurt me the way you did. But out of respect for what we were and what we could have been, let me tell you something. You can't trust Beth Phoenix the way you should have trusted in me. I'll tell you what you can trust in now. You can trust that you'll never get your title back from me. You can trust that I will destroy you, on the inside and out! And you can trust that I know just how I'm gonna do it. You asked for this, Trish. Not me."



The addition of Beth Phoenix to Trish and Mickie's feud was intended to forcibly give the challenger the advantage in the new round of mind games. However, Phoenix suffered a freak injury, leaving Trish to once again fend for herself.

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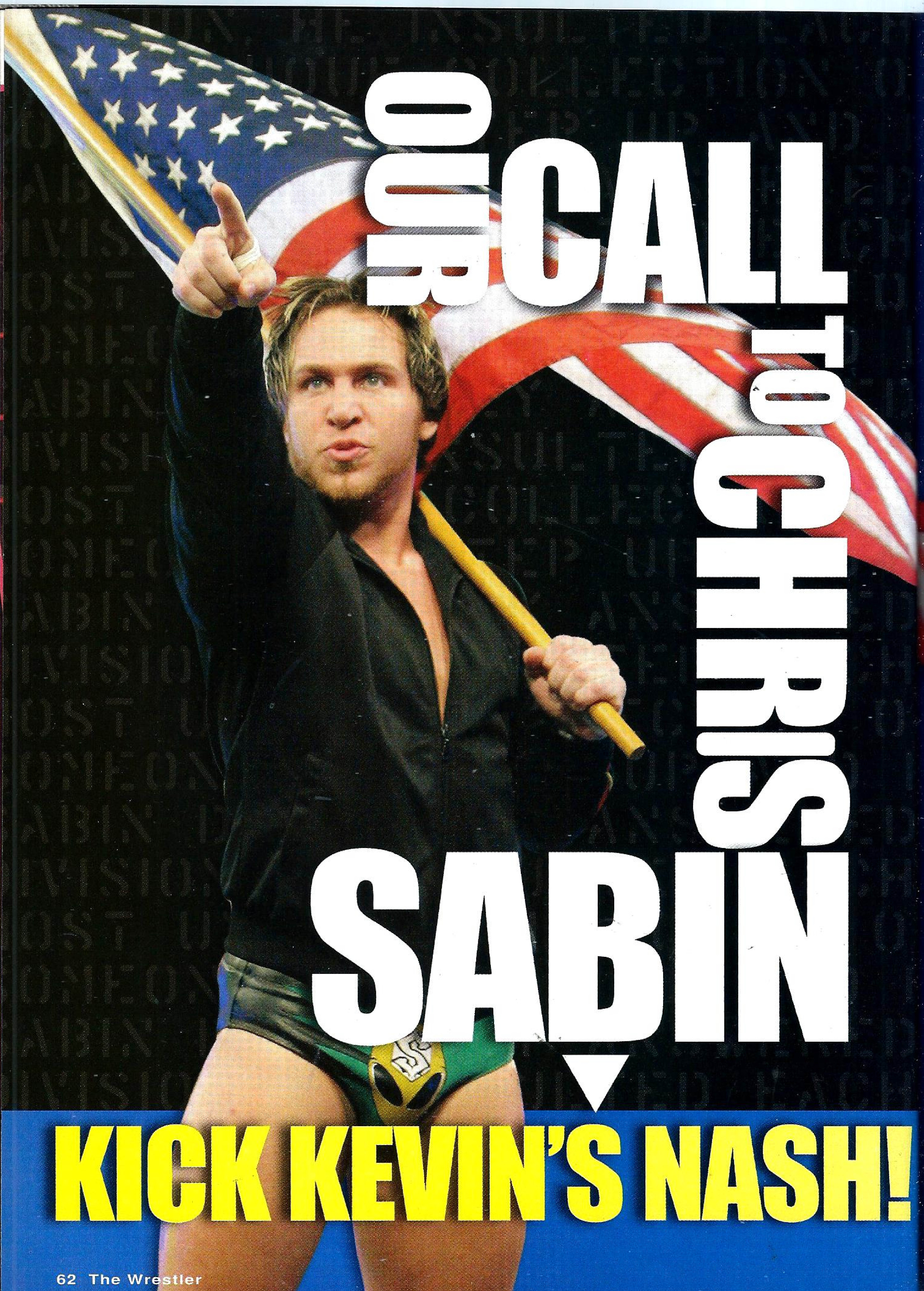
With Plan A and Plan B out the window for Stratus, at least temporarily, she may be forced to be on the defensive as James plots ways to finish her off for good. And, as long as Phoenix is in the mix, Trish must remain wary of subterfuge by her own ally. It's not out of the question that James may even attempt to up the ante by aligning herself with an enforcer of her own. It's impossible to predict what James will do one minute to the next.

Now, it's James' move. Stratus has tipped her opponent off as to which direction her offense is headed, meaning the champ is now in control. In this dangerous game of chess with a madwoman, Stratus is severely threatened and may be just one miscalculated move—or unanticipated countermove—away from checkmate. □



OUR CALL TO CHRIS SABIN

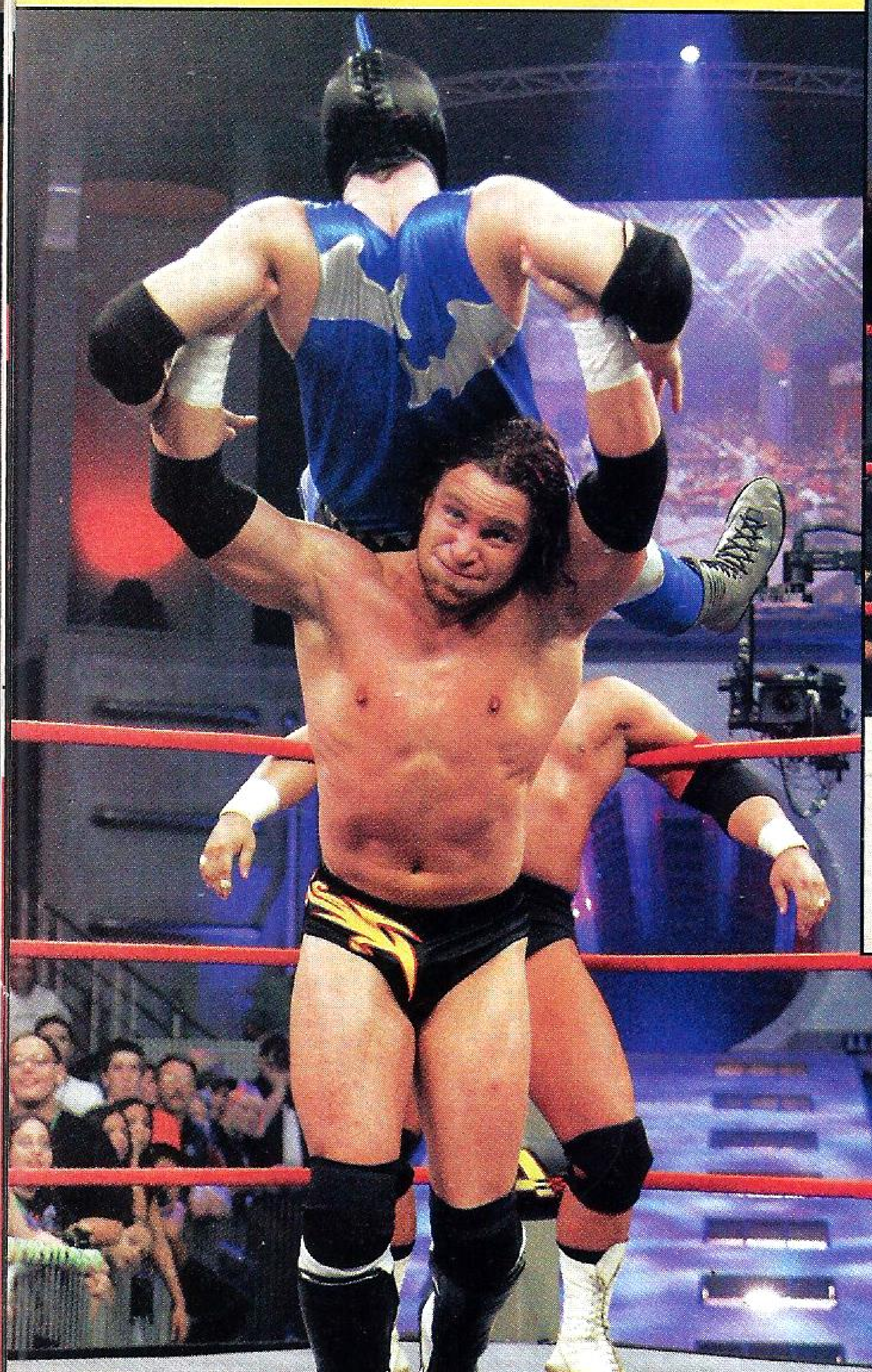
KICK KEVIN'S NASH!

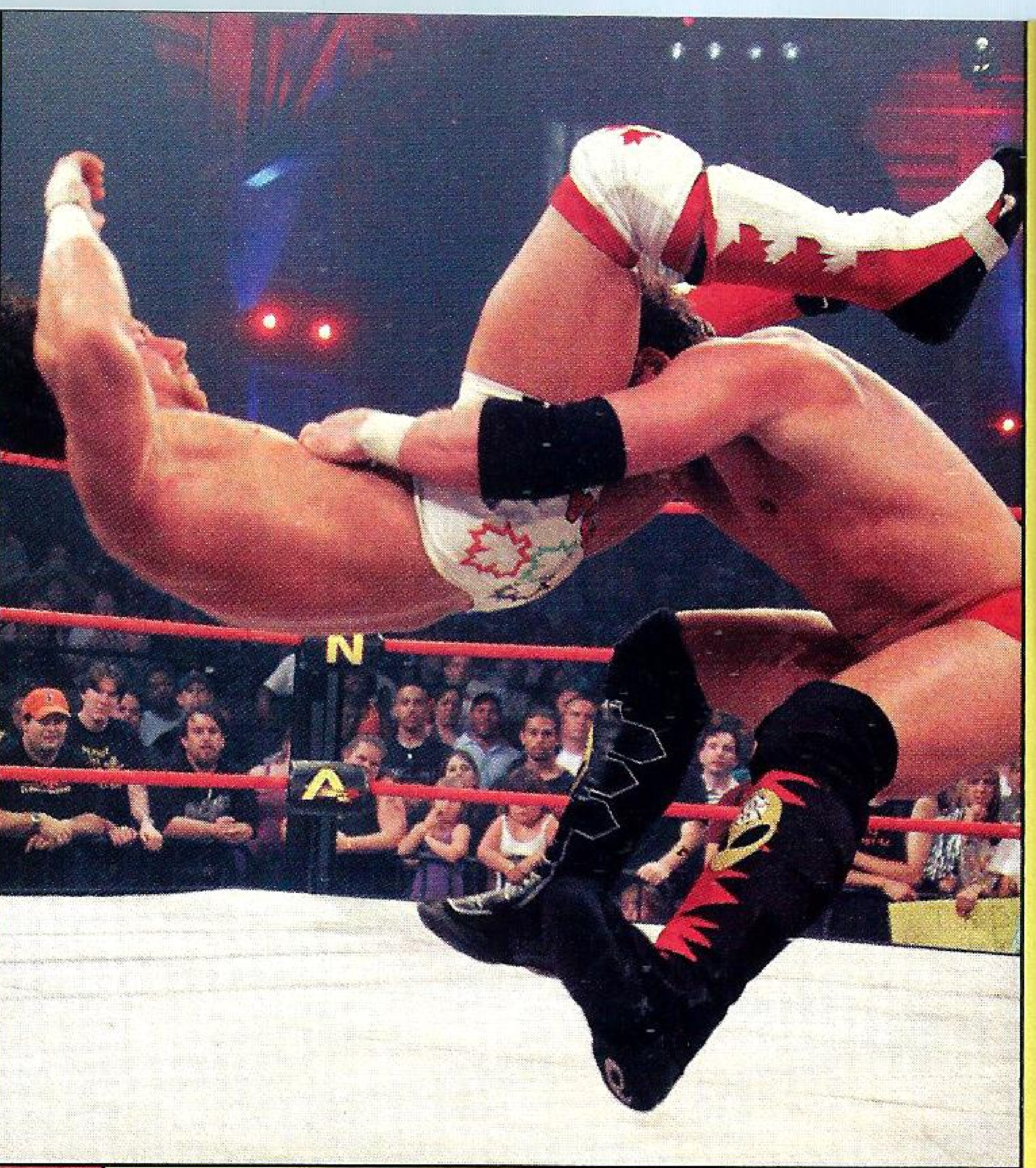
Kevin Nash not only challenged the entire X division, he insulted each man's pride. When TNA's most unique collection of wrestlers needed someone to step up and defend its honor, Chris Sabin dutifully answered the call

By Timothy Drake

Photos By Lee South/TNA Wrestling

TNA'S X DIVISION has set the wrestling world on fire. For most fans tuning in each week to watch *Impact*, the X division is what the company does best. Ask any of those fans to explain why they love the X division, and three names will invariably come up: A. J. Styles, Samoa Joe, and Christopher Daniels. Between them, they have held the X division title nine times and their three-way matches have been heralded as modern classics. Increasingly, fans will mention the name of 24-year-old Chris Sabin in the same breath as those three greats. Styles, Joe, and





Sabin successfully led Team USA to the tournament championship with impressive outings in the ring (left) and decisive leadership outside of it. Nothing exhibited Sabin's development more than when the captain defeated Team Canada's Petey Williams (above) in the tie-breaking match to clinch the World X Cup for Team USA.

Daniels established the X division as the hottest property in wrestling, but it is becoming apparent to everyone that Sabin is its future.

Sabin is hardly new to the X division. After training in Windsor, Ontario, Sabin debuted with TNA in 2003. With his dazzling arsenal of extreme maneuvers, he soon distinguished himself as one of the most promising young competitors in the division. Allying himself with Vince Russo gave Sabin's early career a boost, and he was soon challenging for the X division title. He enjoyed a three-month championship reign in 2003, before dropping the belt to Michael Shane (now, Matt Bentley) in the first ever Ultimate X match. Undaunted, Sabin regained the title on January 7, 2004, but that reign ended only two months later when an injury forced him to forfeit the title. For the next two years, as TNA rapidly expanded its fan base and the X division gained greater prestige, Sabin was unable to regain the title. Some insiders began to suggest that Sabin had become an "also-ran" who would never establish himself as a true main-event wrestler. At the beginning of 2006, Sabin's mission was clear: to prove the skeptics wrong. Thus far, that mission has been an unconventional success.

"Unquestionably, Sabin is currently the hottest wrestler in the X division," Mike Tenay, TNA's lead announcer, points out. "I've seen it many times over the years: A wrestler has all of the tools to become a major player in the sport, but injuries or backstage politics or bad career decisions prevent him from realizing his potential. Then, everything for that wrestler comes together. It's safe to say that, thus far in 2006, everything has come together for Sabin."

Tenay and other insiders argue that the turning point in Sabin's career came on May 18 of this year. That night, Sabin used a perfectly executed cradle shock to defeat Petey Williams, thereby winning the World X Cup for Team USA. A long, painful road had led Sabin to that moment. Back in March, he qualified for the X Cup tournament by defeating Alex Shelley and Sonjay Dutt in an exceptional three-way match. Then, former team

The victory was sweet but short-lived, as Kevin Nash, TNA's resident X division killer, took it upon himself to disrupt Sabin's celebration with the World X Cup. Nash may have chosen the worst person to attack, as the relentless Sabin would not back down from the former world champion.

USA captain Jerry Lynn appointed Sabin the captain of the 2006 team. Sabin was called on to see if he could carry the ball, but, once again, it seemed that he would be undone by injury. A brutal match in late-March against Xavier for Northeast Wrestling left Sabin hospitalized with a severe concussion. Refusing to allow another opportunity to pass him by, he checked himself out of the hospital and led Team USA to its stunning victory over Team Canada.

Sabin's celebration was cut short, however, by former WWF and WCW World champion Kevin Nash, the man who stood poised to curtail Sabin's rise to the top of TNA. Nash sat out much of 2005, nursing a number of career-threatening health problems. He re-emerged in April, appearing in a series of interviews with Alex Shelley that degenerated into embittered—and, at times, deranged—rants against TNA's X division.

Nash made no attempt to hide his plan: He would make himself a star again at the expense of the smaller X division competitors. Destroying the hottest property in TNA would automatically elevate him to the main event and to future big-money contracts. Nash promptly took out Puma with a jackknife powerbomb, and, following Sabin's World X Cup victory, he found himself squarely in the sights of "Big Sexy."

Nash unleashed his rage upon the victorious Sabin, breaking the tournament trophy over the young superstar's head. "It wasn't just one wrestler beating down another," Tenay said. "It was one of the most recognizable figures in the business demonstrating his contempt for an entire style of

Why Does Kevin Nash Hate Little Guys?

By Sidney M. Basil, M.D.

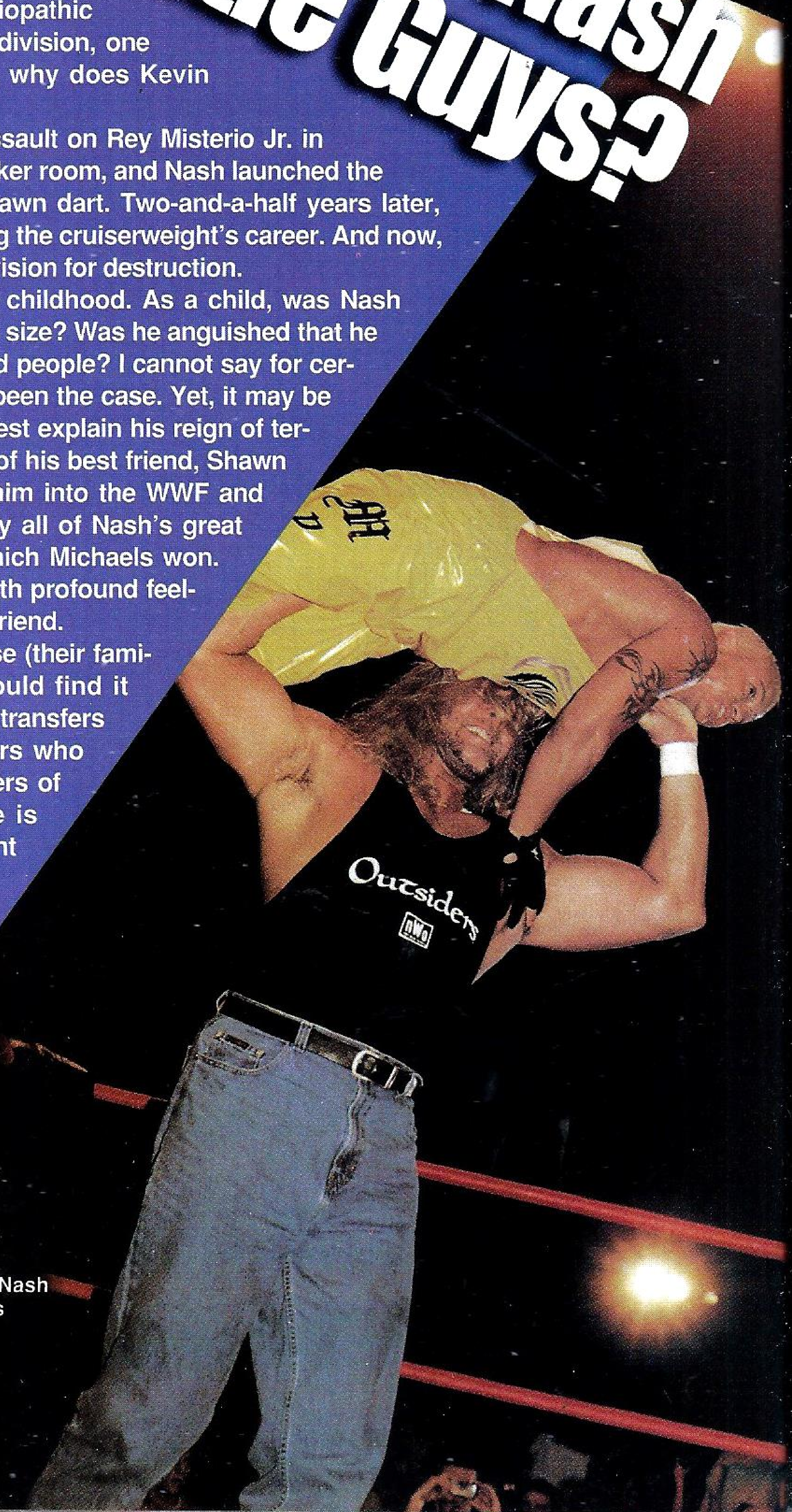
Mr. Nash clearly has a strong need to dominate those around him, and I expect he isn't consciously aware of the reasons why his desire for control manifests itself in sociopathic behavior. Yet, with all of the drama in the X division, one question remains unanswered: Simply put, why does Kevin Nash hate little guys so much?

Few fans will ever forget Nash's brutal assault on Rey Misterio Jr. in August 1996: The NWO invaded the WCW locker room, and Nash launched the 5'3" Misterio into the side of a truck like a lawn dart. Two-and-a-half years later, Nash unmasked Misterio, temporarily derailing the cruiserweight's career. And now, Nash is up to his old tricks, targeting the X division for destruction.

Such behavior typically has its origins in childhood. As a child, was Nash mocked by his fellow students because of his size? Was he anguished that he couldn't "fit" into a world of the average-sized people? I cannot say for certain, but I would not be surprised if this had been the case. Yet, it may be Nash's relationships as an adult that could best explain his reign of terror. He spent his career living in the shadow of his best friend, Shawn Michaels—the man who originally brought him into the WWF and who launched him into superstardom. Nearly all of Nash's great matches were against Michaels—most of which Michaels won. This situation has quite possibly left Nash with profound feelings of resentment toward his much smaller friend.

Given that Nash and Michaels are so close (their families apparently holiday together), Nash would find it unthinkable to attack his friend. And so, he transfers all of that pent-up aggression onto wrestlers who remind him of Michaels, such as the wrestlers of the TNA X division. I fear that, unless he is stopped, smaller wrestlers will bear the brunt of Nash's psychosis for years to come.

It is necessary to curb Nash's psychotic behavior now, rather than reinforce it by supporting his actions, as has been done in the past. He was once lauded for towering over smaller wrestlers and handling them as if they were playthings; now he must be punished for it. And breaking this old-dog habit is going to be much harder than anyone may realize.



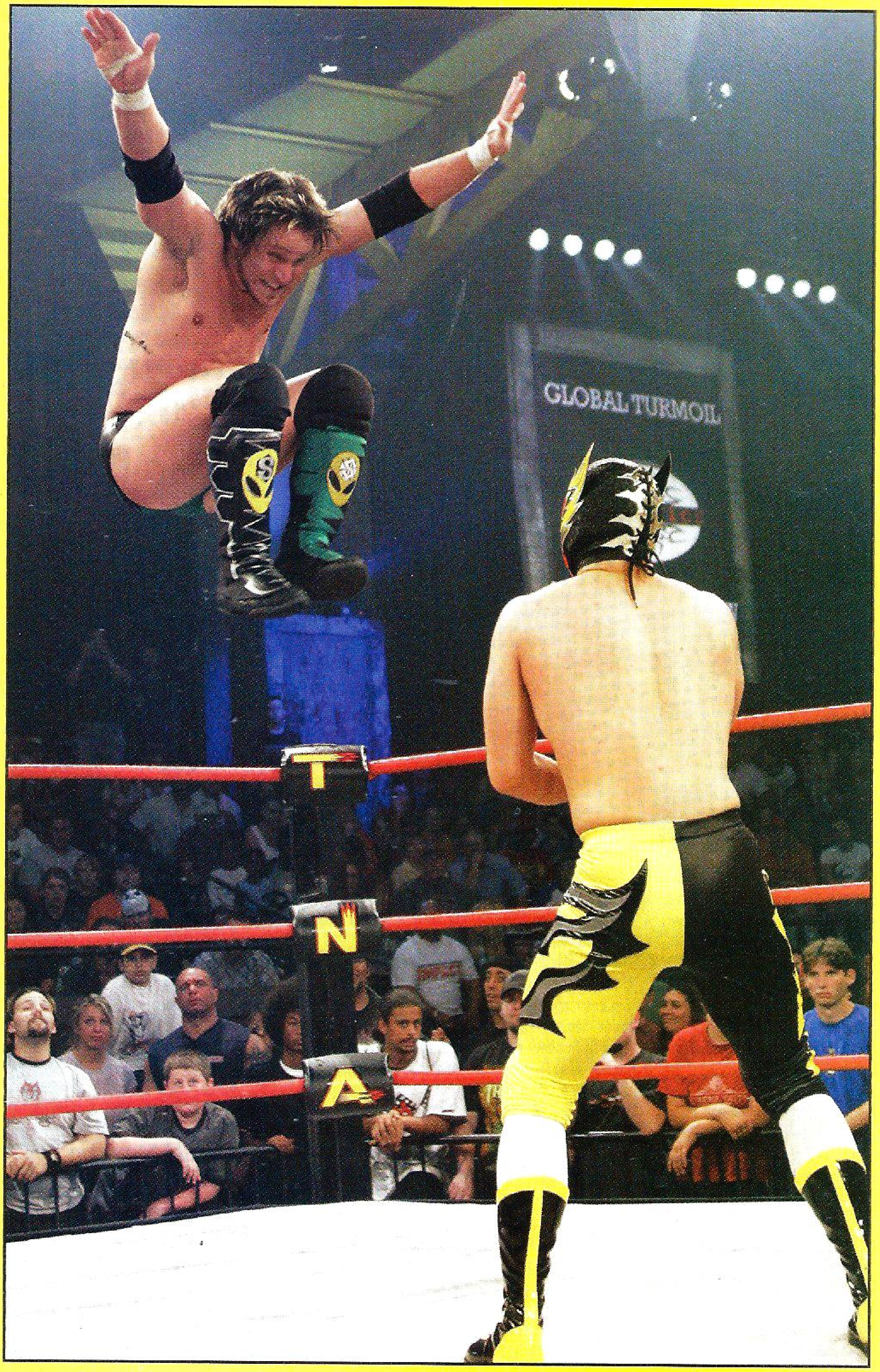
The diagnosis: Nash resents Michaels

wrestling and an entire stratum of wrestler. Instead of giving back to the business that made him a millionaire, Nash just keeps taking."

Since that beatdown, Sabin took on the task of defending the honor of the X division, even though that has meant he has had to endure the full range of the crushing offense that enabled Nash to become a multiple-time world champion. Thus far, though, Sabin hasn't shown any signs that he will let Nash win and the X division is better off for it.

As a result, Sabin has won new respect from fans and from his peers. "I used to think he was a punk, but Sabin really has matured into a locker-room leader," said fellow TNA wrestler Raven. "For that reason, it's not surprising to me that he has stepped up and made it clear he won't put up with Nash's crap. Sabin knows that the X division is revolutionizing wrestling, just like ECW did years ago, and he's not gonna let some dinosaur ruin everything. More power to Chris, I say."

Nearly all of the X division wrestlers contacted for this story share Raven's sentiments; however, many of them privately fear that the 7'0", 355-pound. Nash will ultimately prove too formidable for the 5'10", 207-pound Sabin. In the end, Chris Sabin's heart may prove to lead him down a path that he had never before seen himself going down—and, possibly, into a battle he cannot win.



The X division is widely regarded as the most unique aspect of TNA. Chris Sabin has staked his career on making the division the crown jewel of TNA and no one—not even Kevin Nash—will take that away from him.

Still, there's an old saying in wrestling: A good big man will always beat a good small man. Which is why, if Sabin is to survive Nash's onslaught and to affirm his status as one of the top X division superstars, he cannot merely be good—he must be great. ☐

YOUR LETTERS

(Continued from page 5)

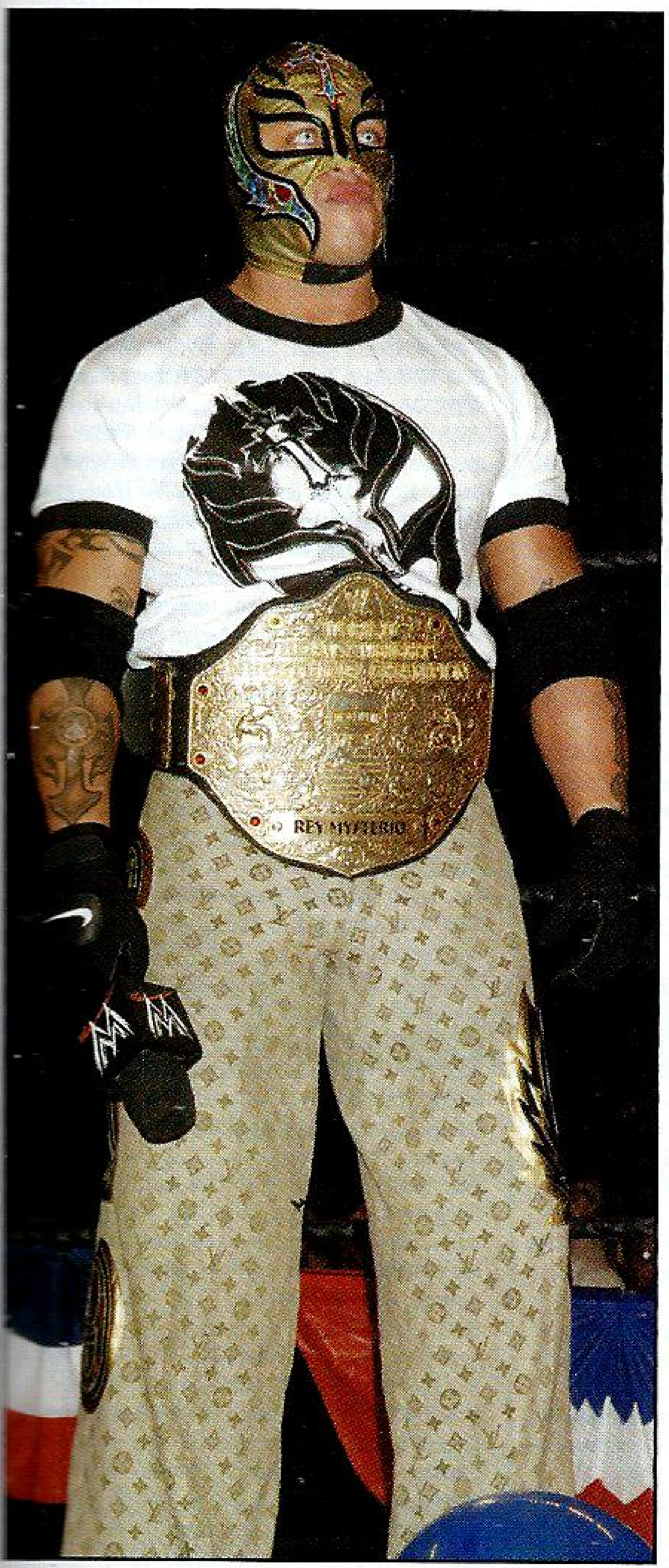
YAY FOR REY

I am so happy and proud of Rey Misterio Jr. He has accomplished so much, and he deserves all of it! He may be the smallest man on the Smackdown brand, but that doesn't stop him from being a *great* wrestler! I am so glad and happy—as is Rey I'm sure—that JBL is gone. All he did was make Rey's wrestling life a living hell! In the end, it was all worth it because Rey was victorious and continued to live his dream!

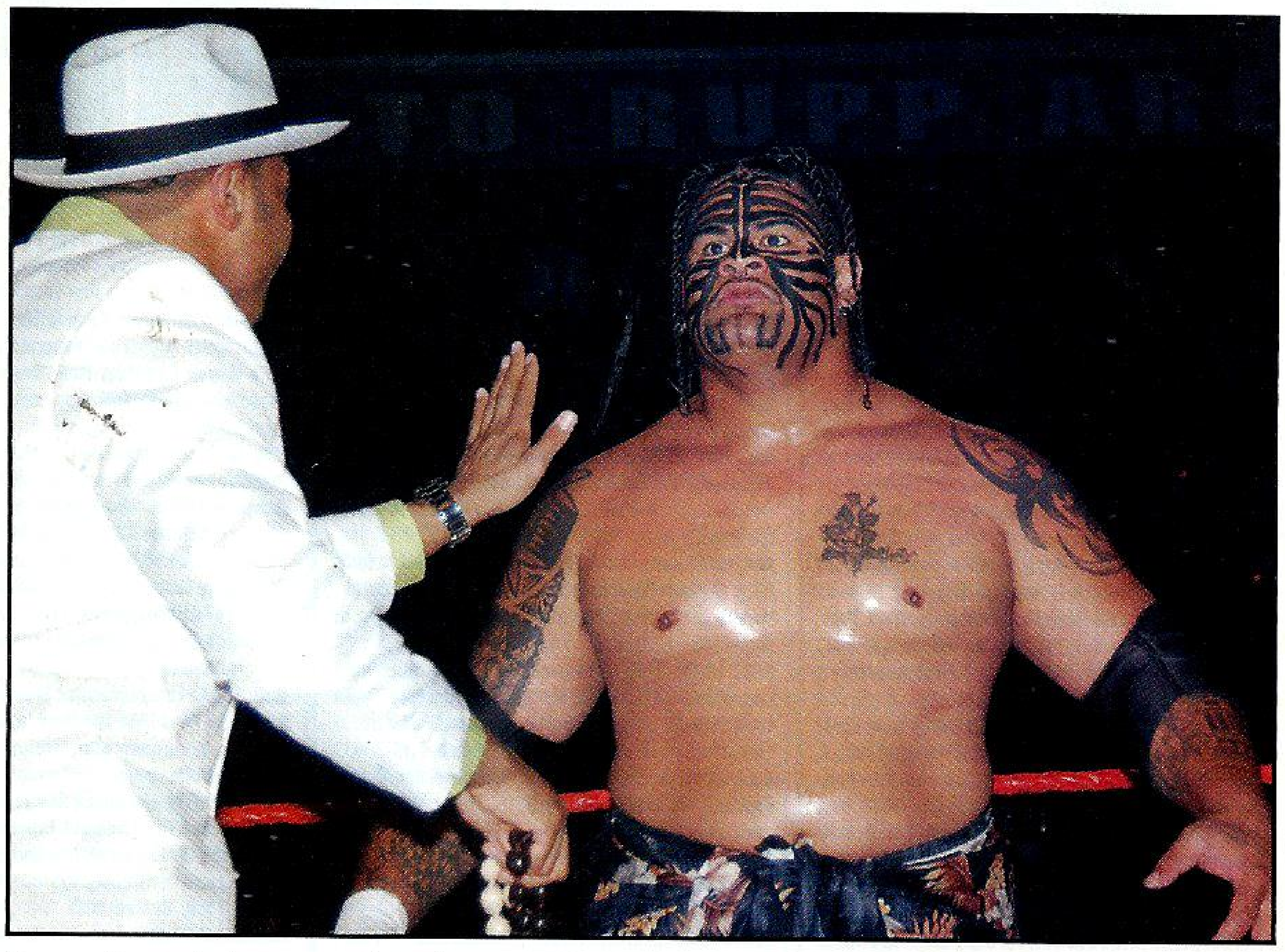
I don't care what was said: Rey deserved the Smackdown World championship. Rey has tons of fans—including me—and there is no one that could ever replace him! The same goes for a really good friend of Rey's, named Eddie Guerrero. The men actually counted each other as brothers. Eddie's death was shocking to everybody and a lot of people miss him very much. Everyone is saying that dedicating a wrestling match to Eddie Guerrero is beyond strange, but I think that someone who does that must be a *very* caring guy. Rey wrestles for Eddie, and his dedications are always from his heart. What's so strange about that?

Who knows? In the end, Rey might achieve all his goals and go further than his critics ever said he could—and that just might be his dream come true.

ABBY GONZALEZ
Chapman, KS



Among the many feelings Smackdown World champ Rey Misterio Jr. evokes, perhaps the most important are those of drive and dedication. Reader Abby Gonzalez appreciates the champ not only as a great wrestler, but a positive role model for the community at large.



Umaga's matches may be short, but the aftereffects are felt throughout the entire WWE. Professional wrestling's newest Samoan import is looking more and more like a potential contender to the Raw World title, argues Maria Santucci.

UMAGA COMING UP HUGE

How great is Umaga? In my opinion, he is the most impressive big man to enter WWE in years. Yes, I realize that he was there before—known as Jamal from Three Minute Warning—but now he is far more impressive.

The man is flat out unbeatable, regardless of what the win-loss record says. Plus, he has a great manager in Armando Alejandro Estrada, who reminds me of a combination of managers such as Bobby Heenan and Slick from the 1980s. Estrada is rare in that he watches the back of his investment without worrying about his own goals. Sure, he's evil and cheats from time to time, but he only does it because he's concerned for his client's well-being.

If I had to guess, I would say that Umaga will be Raw World champion by the end of 2006 or—at least—challenging for the title. I'm really excited to see Umaga's career take off, and I hope he rules over WWE for a long time.

MARIA SANTUCCI
Bronx, NY □

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the Wrestler®

TOP 10

1 **CHRISTIAN CAGE**
225, Toronto, Ontario
(2) NWA World champion

2 **REY MISTERIO JR.**
163, San Diego, CA
(3) Smackdown World champion

3 **ROB VAN DAM**
237, Battle Creek, MI
(–) Raw World champion

4 **EDGE**
240, Toronto, Ontario
(8) No. 1 contender: Raw World title

5 **BRYAN DANIELSON**
185, Aberdeen, WA
(6) Ring of Honor champion

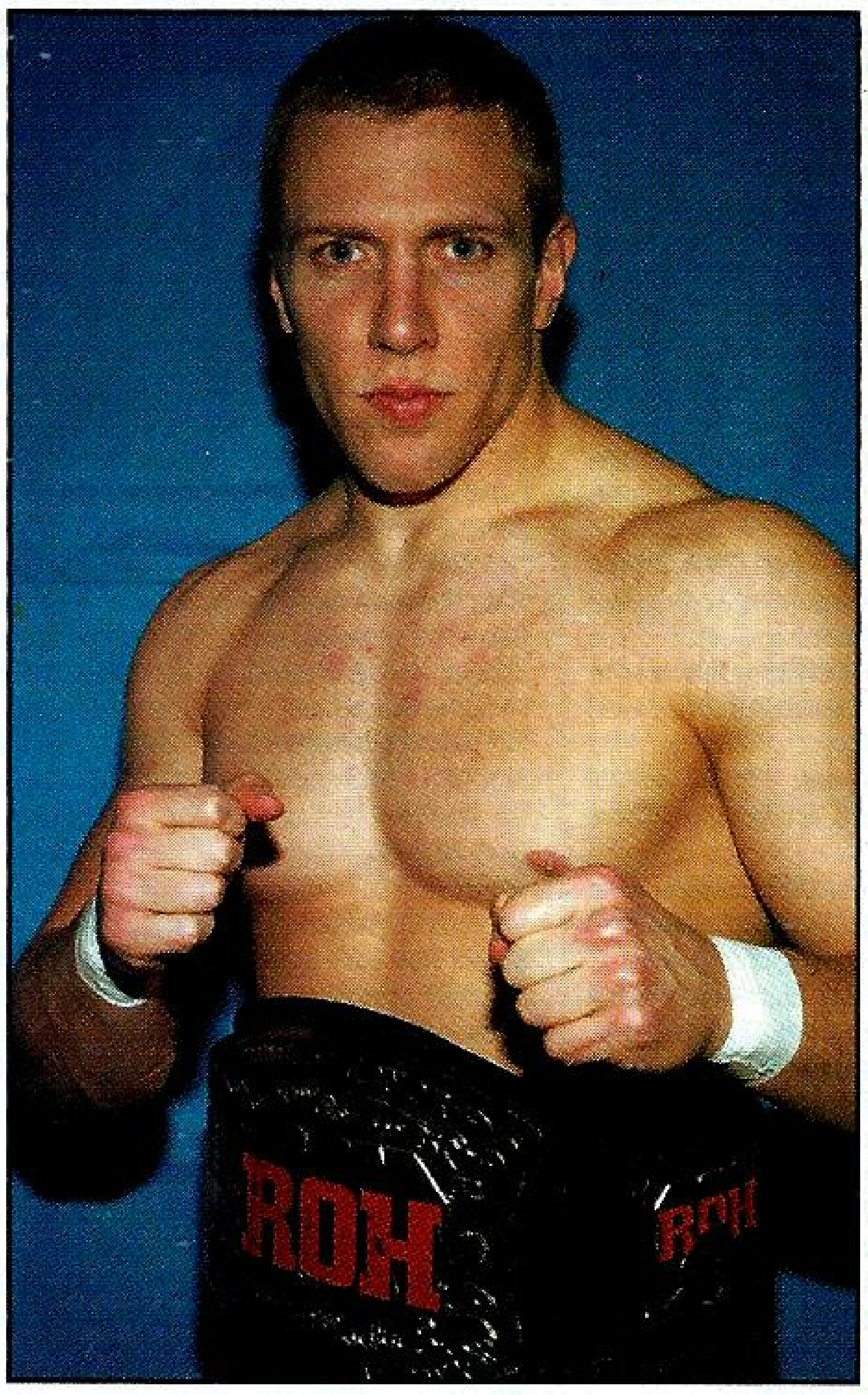
6 **SATOSHI KOJIMA**
223, Tokyo, Japan
(–) All Japan Triple Crown Champion

7 **JUN AKIYAMA**
240, Osaka, Japan
(9) GHC heavyweight champion

8 **BROCK LESNAR**
297, Minneapolis, MN
(7) IWGP heavyweight champion

9 **JOHN CENA**
260,West Newbury, MA
(1) No. 2 contender: Raw World title

10 **MARK HENRY**
331, Silsbee, TX
(–) No. 1 contender: SD World title


Bryan Danielson

TAG TEAMS

1 **CHRIS HARRIS & JAMES STORM**
Combined weight: 516 pounds
(1) NWA World tag team champions

2 **PAUL LONDON & SPANKY KENDRICK**
Combined weight: 380 pounds
(5) Smackdown World tag team champions

3 **THE SPIRIT SQUAD**
Combined weight: 433 pounds
(2) Raw World tag team champions

4 **TEAM 3D**
Combined weight: 587 pounds
(3) No. 1 contenders: NWA World tag title

5 **THE JAMES GANG**
Combined weight: 515 pounds
(–) No. 2 contenders: NWA World tag title

6 **AUSTIN ARIES & RODERICK STRONG**
Combined weight: 407 pounds
(7) Ring of Honor tag team champions

7 **A.J. STYLES & CHRISTOPHER DANIELS**
Combined weight: 412 pounds
(–) No. 3 contenders: NWA World tag title

8 **THE NEIGHBORHOODIE & SHAD GASPARD**
Combined weight: 517 pounds
(–) OVW Southern tag team champions

9 **THE HIGHLANDERS**
Combined weight:470 pounds
(–) No. 1 contenders: Raw World tag title

10 **MASA CHONO & HIROYOSHI TENZAN**
Combined weight: 505 pounds
(6) IWGP International tag team champions

WWE RAW

Raw World Champion:
ROB VAN DAM
(3) 237, Battle Creek, MI
1—EDGE
(1) 240, Toronto, Ontario
2—JOHN CENA
(C) 260, West Newbury, MA
3—UMAGA
(9) 348, Isle of Samoa
4—SHELTON BENJAMIN
(5) 245, Spartanburg, SC
5—CARLITO CARIBBEAN COOL
(8) 220, San Juan, Puerto Rico
6—JOHNNY NITRO
(–) 204, Los Angeles, CA
7—TRIPLE-H
(2) 274, Greenwich, CT
8—SHAWN MICHAELS
(4) 217, San Antonio, TX
9—MICK FOLEY
(–) 287, Long Island, NY
10—KANE
(6) 326, St. Louis, MO

WWE SMACKDOWN

Smackdown World Champion:
REY MISTERIO JR.
(C) 163, San Diego, CA
1—MARK HENRY
(6) 331, Silsbee, TX
2—BOBBY LASHLEY
(4) 255, Topeka, KS
3—THE GREAT KHALI
(–) 408, Bombay, India
4—BOOKER T
(7) 250, Houston, TX
5—THE UNDERTAKER
(5) 304, Dallas, TX
6—MATT HARDY
(8) 213, Cameron, NC
7—FINLAY
(9) 235, Belfast, Ireland
8—GREGORY HELMS
(–) 210, Raleigh, NC
9—KEN KENNEDY
(–) 246, Minneapolis, MN
10—TATANKA
(–) 250, Pembroke, NC

OVW

OVW Champion:
C.M. PUNK
(1) 220, Chicago, IL
1—AARON STEVENS
(4) 240, Martha's Vineyard, MA
2—SETH SKYFIRE
(2) 195, Birmingham, AL
3—BORIS ALEXIEV
(10) 255, Moscow, Russia
4—SHAD GASPARD
(9) 285, Brooklyn, NY
5—ROADKILL
(4) 302, Lancaster, PA
6—KASEY JAMES
(–) 235, Memphis, TN
7—THE NEIGHBORHOODIE
(–) 222, parts unknown
8—ELIJAH BURKE
(8) 230, Jacksonville, FL
9—CHET THE JET
(–) 230, Buffalo, NY
10—MIKEY BATTS
(7) 171, New Haven, CT

RING OF HONOR

ROH Champion:
BRYAN DANIELSON
(C) 185, Aberdeen, WA
1—NIGEL MCGUINNESS
(4) 220, London, England
2—HOMICIDE
(–) 220, Brooklyn, NY
3—COLT CABANA
(5) 235, Chicago, IL
4—CHRISTOPHER DANIELS
(6) 210, Los Angeles, CA
5—JIMMY RAVE
(1) 175, Atlanta, GA
6—DAVEY RICHARDS
(–) 202, Othello, WA
7—DELIRIOUS
(–) 186, Edge of Sanity, USA
8—RODERICK STRONG
(2) 205, Tampa, FL
9—AUSTIN ARIES
(7) 202, Milwaukee, WI
10—SAMOA JOE
(3) 270, American Samoa

OFFICIAL RATINGS

Top 10 and Tag Team ratings are based on won-lost records for the past month, quality of opposition, and inherent skill of each wrestler or team. These ratings are compiled by the magazine's editorial board. All other ratings are based on the official current positions of challengers to the top title in each category; certain titleholders receive an automatic spot in the ratings. The number in parentheses indicates a wrestler's position in that category last issue; (–) indicates that the wrestler was not rated in that category last issue while (C) indicates the wrestler was champion in that category last issue. Note: In an effort to keep the ratings as up-to-date as possible, these pages are often the last to be sent to the printer. Thus, the ratings may reflect changes not reflected in the remainder or the issue.

For period ended June 14, 2006

ALL AMERICAN CHAMPIONSHIP WRESTLING: Champion—Prince al-Farat; **1**—Glen Steele; **2**—J. C.; **3**—K.C.; **4**—3rd Rail; **5**—Dexter Hardaway; **6**—Prophet; **7**—Slash; **8**—Honkytonk Man; **9**—Beau Dalton; **10**—Otis.

CANADIAN WRESTLING FEDERATION: Champion—Kerry Brown; **2**—J.T. Thorn; **3**—Sammy Savard; **4**—Master Kwan Chang; **5**—Spyder; **6**—C.K. Sexx; **7**—Tim Warcloud; **8**—Wavell Starr; **9**—Jay Youngblood; **10**—Rip Impact.

EAST COAST WRESTLING ASSOCIATION: Champion—Freak Nastty; **1**—Mike Tobin; **2**—Matt Logan; **3**—Kermon The German; **4**—Andrew Ryker; **5**—Cheetah Master; **6**—Mike Kruel; **7**—Aden Chambers; **8**—Mega; **9**—Mr. Ooh La La; **10**—Chase Del Monte.

HEARTLAND WRESTLING ASSOCIATION: Champion—Jon Moxley; **1**—Brad Smith; **2**—Erick Darkstorm; **3**—Cody Hawk; **4**—Tack; **5**—Matt Stryker; **6**—J.T. Stahr; **7**—Ric Byrne; **8**—Jesse Hyde; **9**—Kimera; **10**—Jon Thornhill

HIGH IMPACT WRESTLING: Champion—Rex Roberts; **1**—Zack Mercury; **2**—Wavell Starr; **3**—Plum Loco; **4**—Richard Pound; **5**—Big Daddy Kash; **6**—Todd Myers; **7**—Cannonball Kelly; **8**—Jeff Tyler; **9**—Jumpin' Joe; **10**—Vance Nevada.

INDEPENDENT WRESTLING FEDERATION: Champion—Kevin Knight; **1**—Shawn Donavan; **2**—Travis Blake; **3**—Fred Sampson; **4**—Justin Corino; **5**—Shane O'Brien; **6**—Aaron Stride; **7**—Dan McGuire; **8**—Tony Torres; **9**—Biggie Biggs; **10**—Franciz.

MID-STATES WRESTLING: Champion—Butch Reed; **1**—Jake Boulder; **2**—Griz; **3**—Michael Barry; **4**—Craig Keesaman; **5**—Jason Jones; **6**—Gary Gram; **7**—Kevin Lovejones; **8**—Jack Dalton; **9**—Aaron Neil; **10**—Thomas Thorn.

NATIONAL WRESTLING SUPERSTARS: Champion—Hasheem Ali. **1**—Johnny Candido; **2**—Corvis Fear; **3**—Nicky Oceans; **4**—Slayer; **5**—T-N-T; **6**—Dave Logan; **7**—Saddam Insane; **8**—Antonio Malave; **9**—Shane Taylor; **10**—The Clown.

NWA MIDSOUTH: Champion—Don Bass; **1**—NXN Rude; **2**—Blackbird Ice; **3**—Blackbird Jazz; **4**—Big Nasty Bill; **5**—Ricky Murdock; **6**—Bill Ray Hickerson; **7**—Black Jack Daniels; **8**—Derrick King; **9**—Tojo Jr.; **10**—Stan Lee

SHIMMER WOMEN ATHLETES: Champion—Vacant; **1**—Sara Del Rey; **2**—Rebecca Knox; **3**—Daizee Haze; **4**—Allison Danger; **5**—MsChif; **6**—Cheerleader Melissa; **7**—Mercedes Martinez; **8**—Lexie Fyfe; **9**—Lacey; **10**—Nikki Roxx.

SUMMIT WRESTLING ASSOCIATION: Champion—Genesis; **2**—Nicholas Tide; **3**—Jason Static; **4**—John Kermon; **5**—C.A. Elliot; **6**—Tank Thomas; **7**—Chucky Wynn; **8**—John Bodey; **9**—Grimace; **10**—Joseph Brooks.

WORLD X-TREME WRESTLING: Champion—Samu; **1**—Samoan Storm; **2**—D.J. Hyde; **3**—E.C. Negro; **4**—Sugaa; **5**—Kris Krude; **6**—The Dynamic Sensation; **7**—Supreme Lee Great; **8**—Toa Maivia; **9**—Nuisance; **10**—Mongoose.

NWA

NWA World Champion:
CHRISTIAN CAGE
(C) 225, Toronto, Ontario

1—SAMOA JOE
(9) 270, American Samoa
2—STING
(5) 255, Venice Beach, CA
3—JEFF JARRETT
(2) 230, Nashville, TN
4—ABYSS
(1) 295, parts unknown
5—SCOTT STEINER
(–) 276, Atlanta, GA
6—RHINO
(–) 275, Detroit, MI
7—TIGER MASK
(–) 205, Osaka, Japan
8—A.J. STYLES
(4) 202, Gainesville, GA
9—DRU ONYX
(–) 325, Laval, Quebec
10—BULLY DOUGLAS
(8) 256, Sikeston, MO

TNA

NWA World Champion:
CHRISTIAN CAGE
(C) 225, Toronto, Ontario

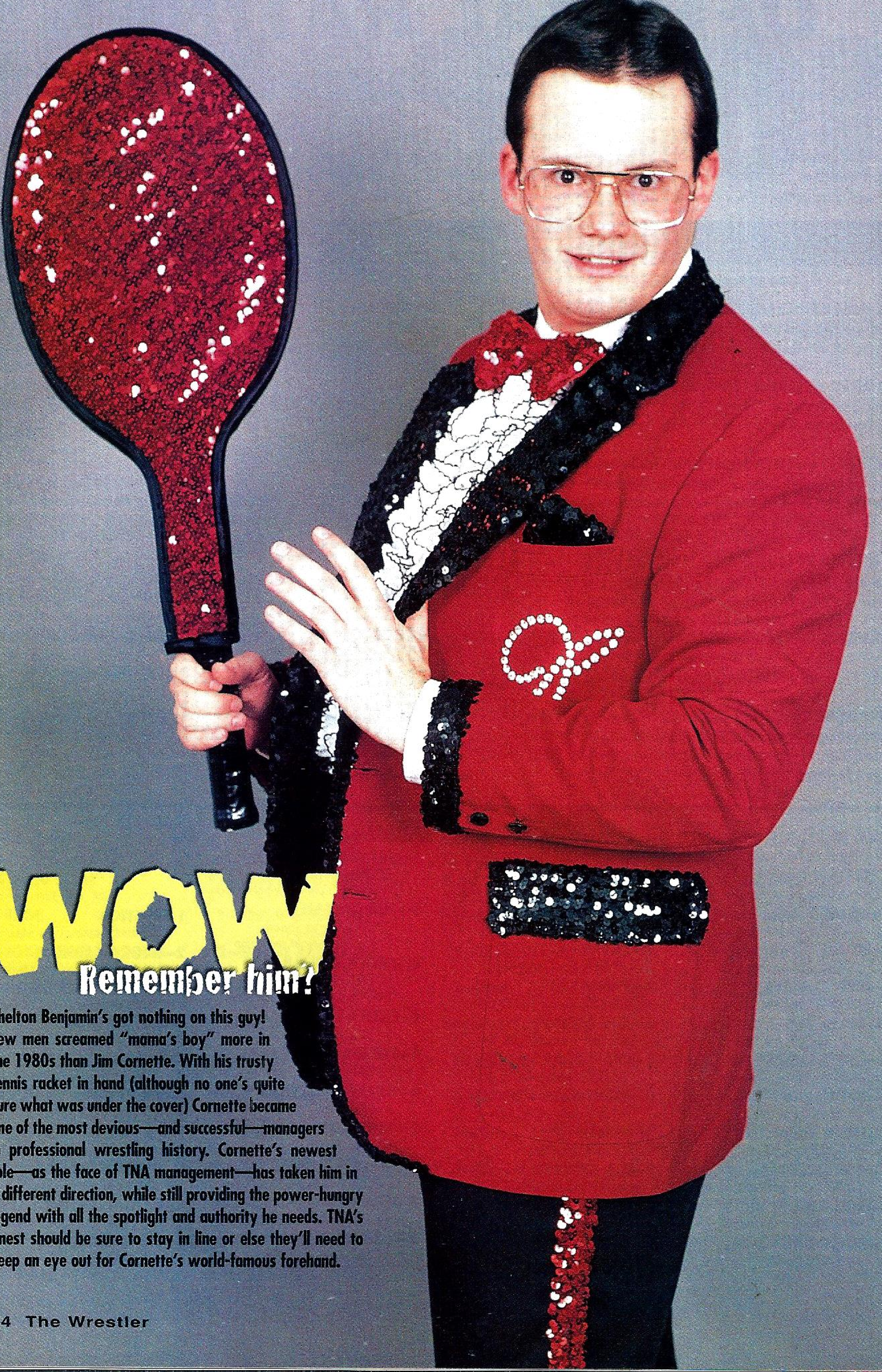
1—RON KILLINGS
(9) 230, Charlotte, NC
2—ABYSS
(1) 295, parts unknown
3—STING
(4) 255, Venice Beach, CA
4—JEFF JARRETT
(5) 230, Nashville, TN
5—CHRIS SABIN
(–) 207, Detroit, MI
6—MONTY BROWN
(–) 275, Detroit, MI
7—SENSHI
(–) 170, Brooklyn, NY
8—A.J. STYLES
(6) 202, Gainesville, GA
9—CHRISTOPHER DANIELS
(7) 210, Los Angeles, CA
10—SAMOA JOE
(2) 270, American Samoa

JAPAN

1—SATOSHI KOJIMA
(3) 223, Tokyo Japan
All Japan Triple Crown champion
2—JUN AKIYAMA
(2) 240, Osaka, Japan
GHC heavyweight champion
3—BROCK LESNAR
(1) 297, Minneapolis, MN
IWGP heavyweight champion
4—KENTA KOBASHI
(4) 282, Fukuchiyama, Japan
5—TOSHIAKI KAWADA
(–) 245, Ashikaga, Japan
6—HIROYOSHI TENZAN
(–) 270, Tokyo, Japan
7—GENICHIRO TENRYU
(8) 235, Tokyo, Japan
8—GIANT BERNARD
(–) 380, Boston, MA
9—KENTA
(9) 176, Saitama, Japan
10—KOJI KANEMOTO
(–) 205, Osaka, Japan

MEXICO

1—MISTICO
(1) 194, Mexico City, Mexico
2—NEGRO CASAS
(–) 185, Mexico City, Mexico
3—ULTIMO GUERRERO
(6) 173, Mexico City, Mexico
4—DR. WAGNER JR.
(10) 215, Mexico City, Mexico
5—PERRO AGUAYO JR.
(2) 165, Zacatecas, Mexico
6—ATLANTIS
(5) 180, Guadalajara, Mexico
7—LA PARKA
(–) 235, Torreon, Mexico
8—BLACK WARRIOR
(7) 198, Torreon, Mexico
9—REY BUCANERO
(–) 207, Mexico City, Mexico
10—CIBERNETICO
(–) 175, Mexico City, Mexico



WOW

Remember him?

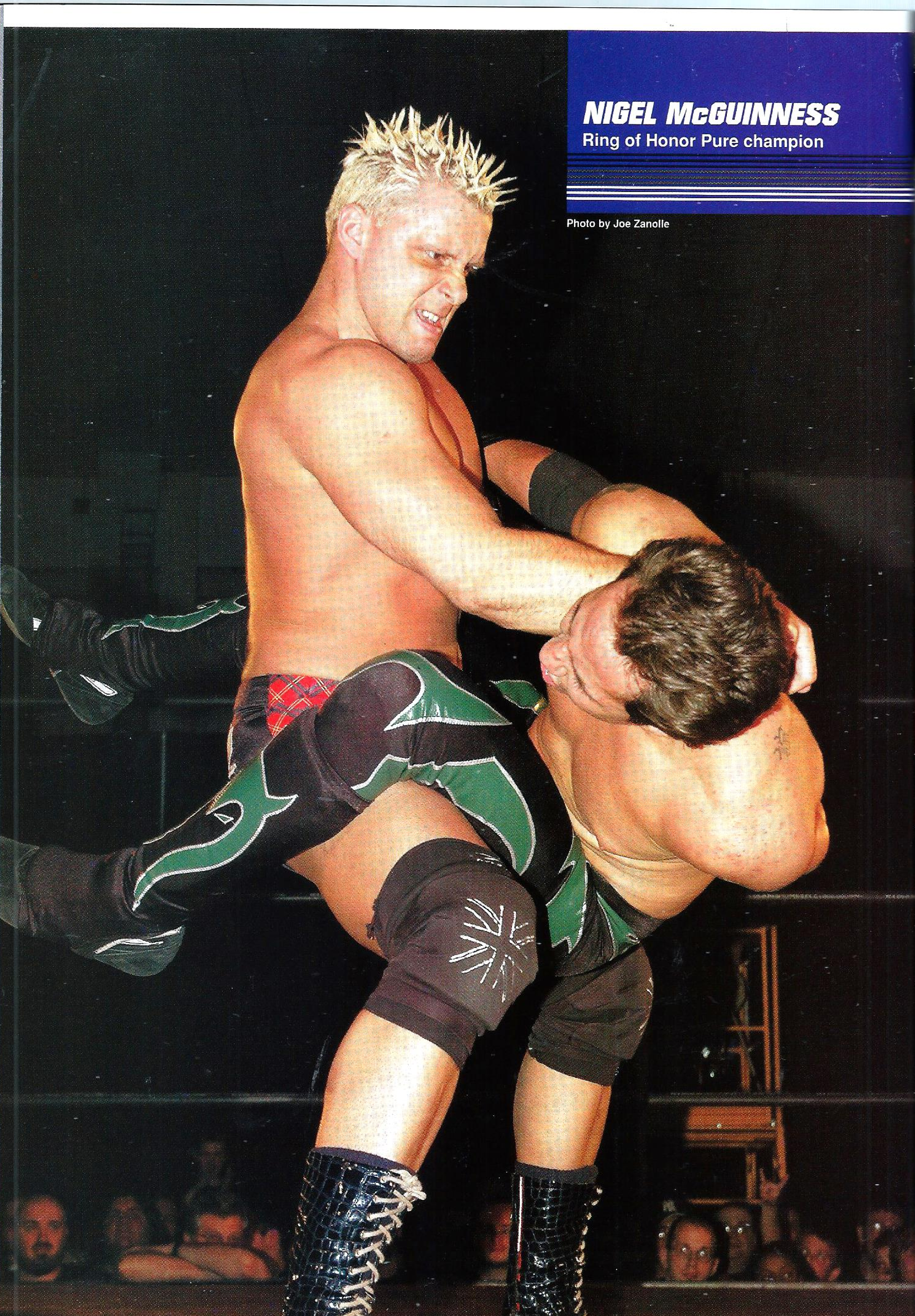
Shelton Benjamin's got nothing on this guy! Few men screamed "mama's boy" more in the 1980s than Jim Cornette. With his trusty tennis racket in hand (although no one's quite sure what was under the cover) Cornette became one of the most devious—and successful—managers in professional wrestling history. Cornette's newest role—as the face of TNA management—has taken him in a different direction, while still providing the power-hungry legend with all the spotlight and authority he needs. TNA's finest should be sure to stay in line or else they'll need to keep an eye out for Cornette's world-famous forehand.

CHRISTIAN CAGE

NWA World Champion

Photo by Lee South/TNA Wrestling

AUSTRALIA
U.S.A.
HEAVYWEIGHT CHAMPION
WRESTLING
NWA
MEXICO



NIGEL McGUINNESS

Ring of Honor Pure champion

Photo by Joe Zanolle

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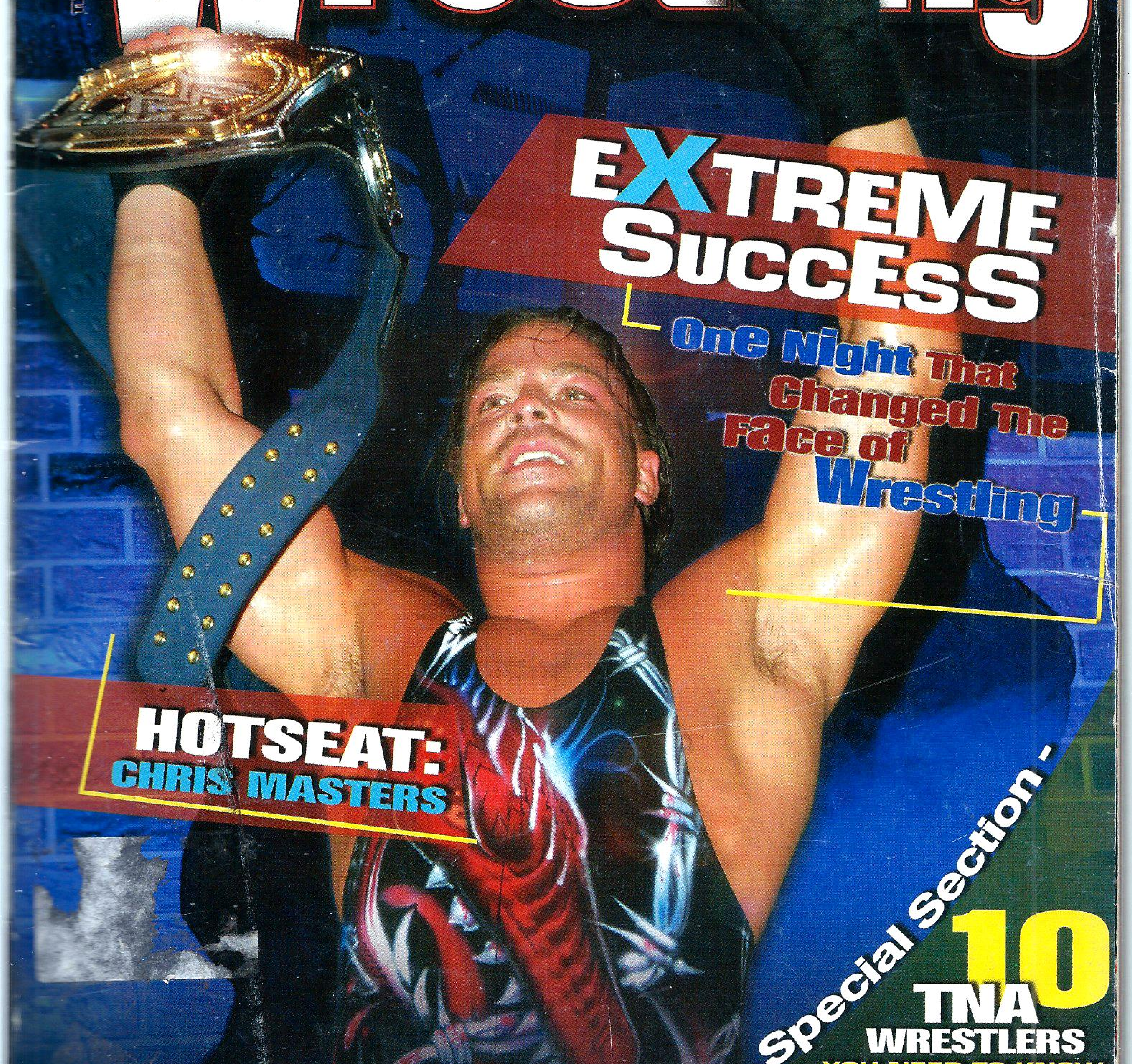

EXTREME SUCCESS

One Night That Changed The Face of Wrestling

HOTSEAT: CHRIS MASTERS

- Special Section -

10 TNA WRESTLERS YOU NEED TO KNOW

inside wrestling

THE MAGAZINE THAT RIPS THE LID OFF PRO WRESTLING

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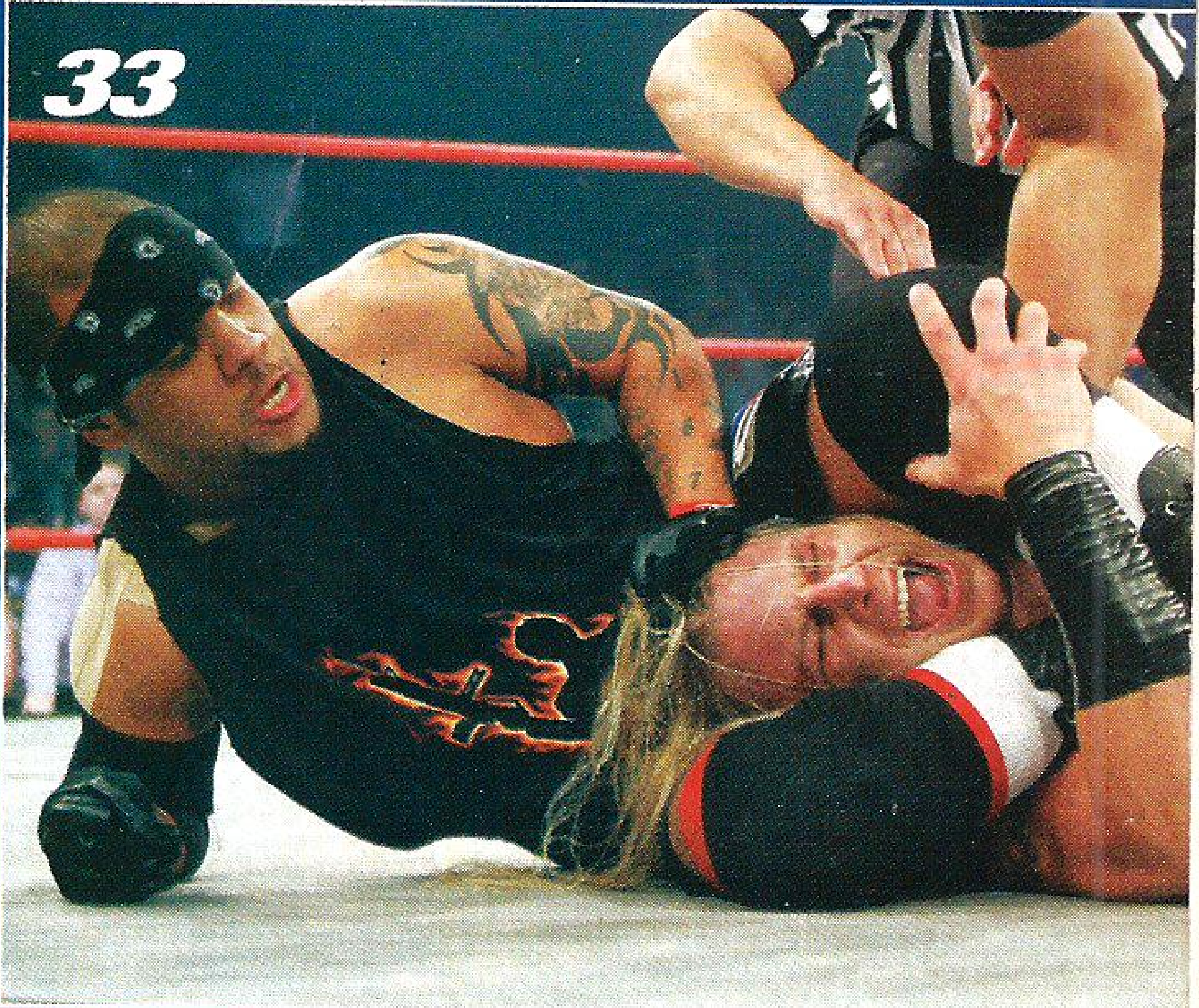

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"Not one of those guys can hold a candle to the powerful perfection that is 'The Masterpiece'"

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George Napolitano

COVER DESIGN:
David Romanosky

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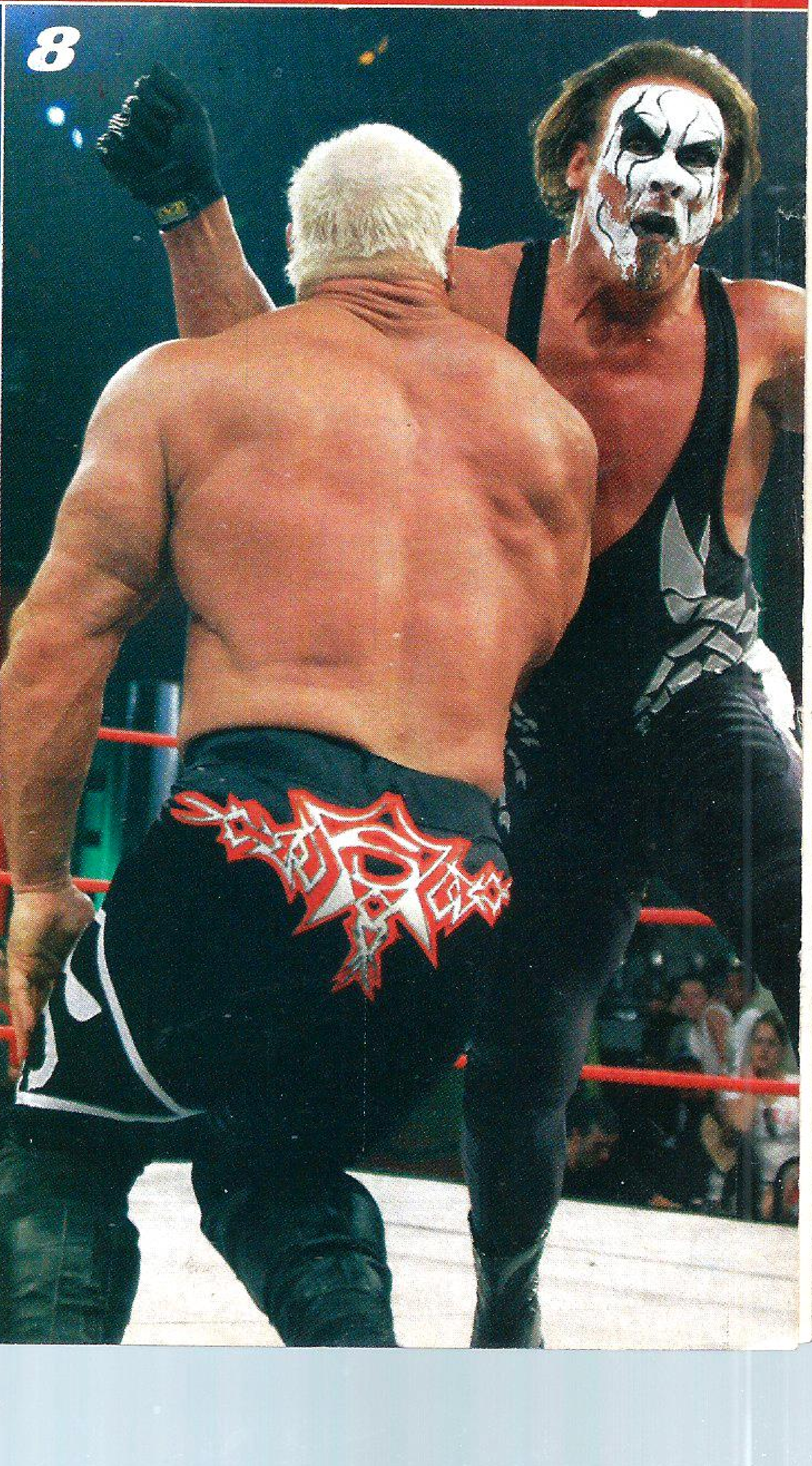

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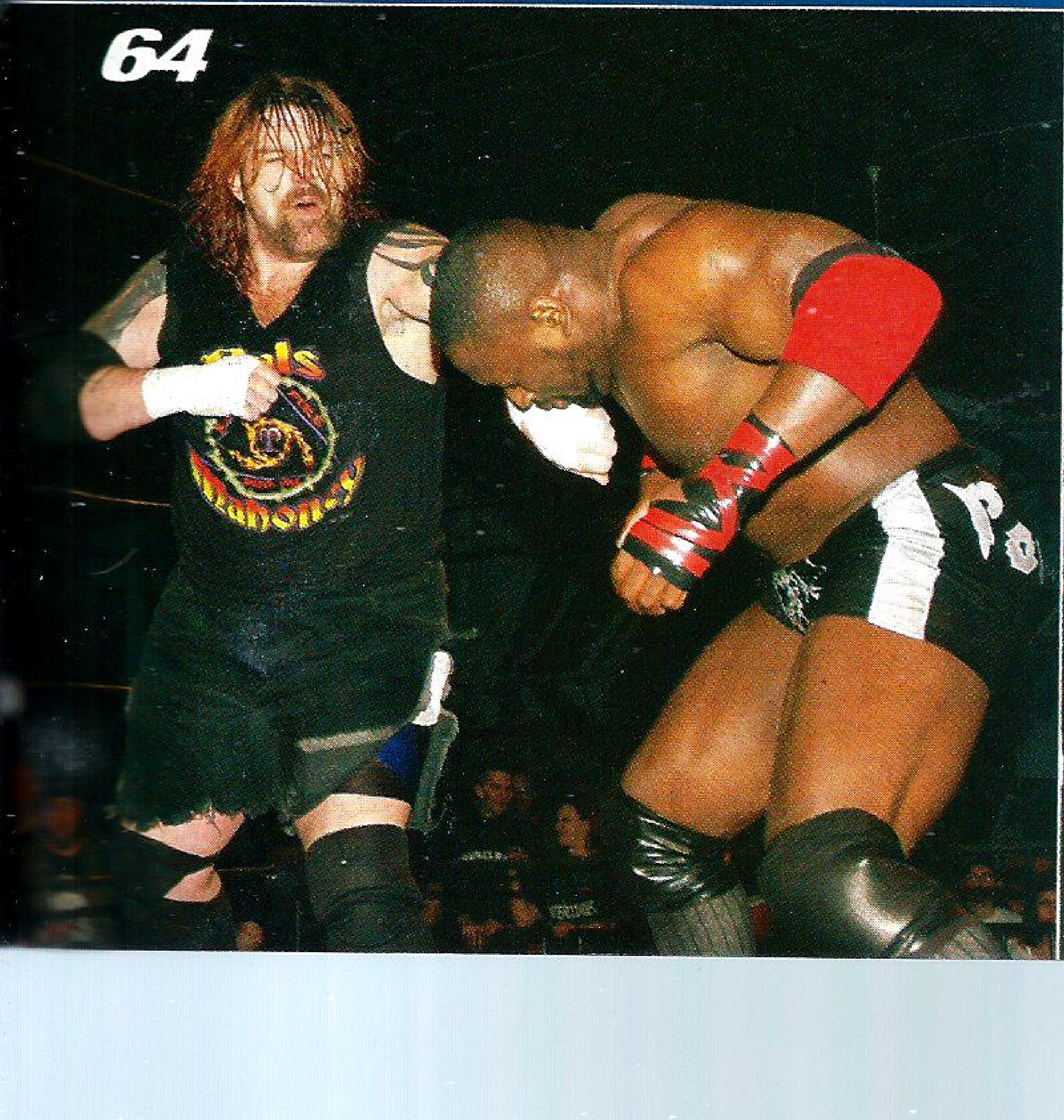

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There may be some truth to the theory that WWE is prone to hire wrestlers based more on their physical stature—such as the oft-criticized Matt Morgan experiment—rather than wrestling acumen. Reader Timmel Koonce attempts to explain why this is so, as well as point out that size doesn't always equal success.

MORE TO THE MYTH

I was inspired to write to your column by a very prevalent though true notion that is echoed not only in this publication, but also many other wrestling publications that I have read. That notion is that WWE has a great prevalence for promoting overgrown, overly muscled behemoths as their champions and faces of their product. I am not writing in favor of such an eschewed hiring practice, but I will endeavor to explain why this most likely is the case, at least as I see it.

Since the early days of "Hulkamania," WWE has committed to creating larger-than-life personas for their superstars. Along with that come over-the-top mannerisms, voice inflections, body language, and storylines. This brand of movie fantasy requires that WWE—much like a film director—finds individuals who are not necessarily the best wrestlers, but who fit and can play the characters that they have in mind. Take The Boogeyman, for instance. While it is clear that his stamina is questionable at best and he really can't wrestle half a damn, he fits the character, and he plays it very well.

As guilty as WWE may be of being infected with the "big man syndrome," it should be kept in mind that for every Kane or Undertaker, there are hundreds of Matt Morgans and Nathan Joneses that come into WWE, make a fast impact, and then get shipped out the door just as quickly. I believe that a very good (or great) average or even a small size wrestler can become successful in WWE, so long as they have a special and intangible quality that sets him apart from everyone else.

That is the thing that I truly believe is most responsible for success or failure in an entertainment-driven industry like professional wrestling. It is more important than having superior size, strength, or a stunning physique. If you take all the greats, like Ric Flair, Dusty Rhodes, Randy Savage, and even Triple-H today, they all have that intangible quality.

TIMMEL KOONCE
Brooklyn, NY

A TNA WRESTLING POEM

Yeah, I'm talking about wrestling,
No fun intended.
TNA is wrestling reinvented.
If WWE is heaven, then I'll sell my soul.
Because I love Alex Shelley and his submission holds.
This is a poem, not a rap.

Some TNA fans have taken issue with the fact that newcomers to the promotion immediately jump into title contention over their vast supply of homegrown talent. Men such as Matt Bentley should be able to showcase their abilities in main-event matches, according to Logan Dixon.

Samoa Joe and his ultimate fighting style put wrestling back on the map.
And don't forget about Monty Brown,
He'll pounce you off your feet.
Jeff Jarrett is from Nashville,
He can't help but cheat.
Okay, maybe he cheats,
But the Jarretts had a vision.
An innovative, death-defying style known as the X division,
Where wrestlers of all different shapes and sizes compete.
They have different moves,
Which makes them very unique.
Back in the day, I thought that WWE is where you could find all the action.
But it's TNA—not Trish—that gives me total satisfaction.

JAMES HADLEY
Benton Harbor, MI

WWE's hardcore swing is nothing more than a publicity stunt that will never do justice to the tradition of the rogue form of wrestling. Reader Denise Carter argues that legends Terry Funk and Mick Foley have become little more than spokesmen for a watered-down product.

TNA BROUGHT TO TASK

I don't like the way the TNA Championship Committee gives a title match to the first newcomer that drops off the WWE roster. For example: Before Christian Cage was given a title match with Jeff Jarrett, they should've at least put him in a non-title match with the champ to see if he could beat him under those conditions first.

If a Matt Bentley shows a lot of potential and personality, it's just sad that TNA won't let him show off a little bit. What I mean by "showing off" is to give him a NWA World title or at least an X division title shot against Samoa Joe.

LOGAN DIXON
Pottsville, AR

HARDCORE HANGOVER

Personally, it made me sick to my stomach to watch the interview between Mick Foley and Terry Funk on *Raw*. Who do these guys think they are? Foley states that Edge and he are the two greatest hardcore wrestlers and that their match at WrestleMania could never be duplicated by anything past or present. Then, Terry Fossil comes out as a huge advocate for ECW and states that he is one of the greats of hardcore wrestling. Even Foley, who is currently suffering from brain loss, called Funk's bluff and said that he had been looking out for his own pocket book, rather than the good of the industry.

WWE will never know the brutality of ECW, or the hard work of being the underdog and sacrificing it all for a crowd in a Bingo hall, not knowing when and why they haven't been paid for months on end. ECW was a beautiful thing, and WWE is going to ruin that.

DENISE CARTER
Stony Plain, Alberta □

names makin' news

By Harry Burkett

WHERE DOES TNA stand in its promotional battle against WWE? Behind closed doors, even TNA officials would probably admit that their company is not yet in the same league as WWE. Why? That's because even TNA's greatest successes are still not on par with the revenue, ratings, and buy rates that WWE garners up north. Just because TNA seems to be gaining some traction instead of losing hundreds of thousands of dollars each month does not mean the next Monday Night War is the in offing.

Case in point: TNA gave away a PPV-quality match—**Sting** vs. **Scott Steiner**—as the opener for the June 8 edition of *Impact*. TNA executives hoped that the anticipated collision between two former WCW main-eventers, and Sting's proven track record in TNA as a ratings-getter, would help *Impact* score a record-high number.

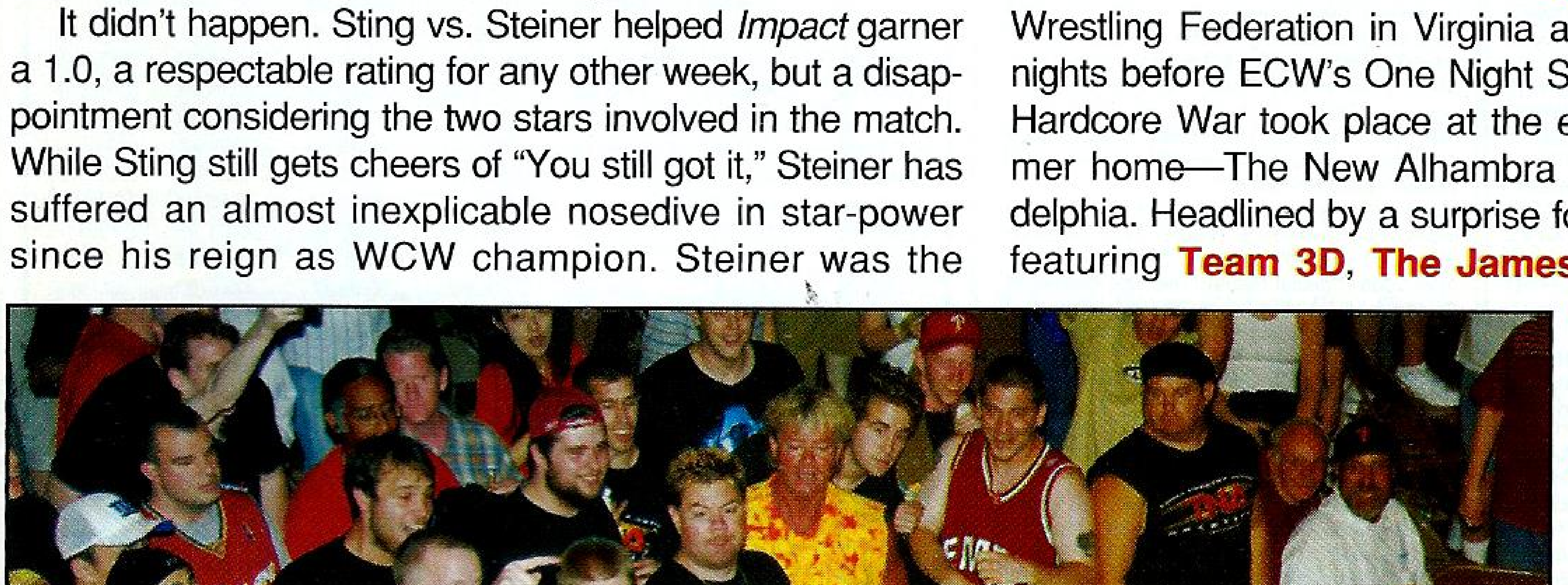
It didn't happen. Sting vs. Steiner helped *Impact* garner a 1.0, a respectable rating for any other week, but a disappointment considering the two stars involved in the match. While Sting still gets cheers of "You still got it," Steiner has suffered an almost inexplicable nosedive in star-power since his reign as WCW champion. Steiner was the coolest bad boy in the company at the time, but it seems as if his struggles against under-carders—including **Spike Dudley**—toward the end of his WWE stint managed to squelch any fire he had left.

Samoa Joe's confrontation with Steiner during the June 8 edition is promising, however. Perhaps TNA can channel the fans' legitimate contempt for Steiner into a plus for Samoa Joe. After all, as Steiner has proven in recent outings, his intensity during promos is as high as ever—and, fortunately for TNA, his long hiatus has improved his physical performance in the ring. Just the theatrics leading to the Joe-Steiner match at Slammiversary made it worthwhile.

In the meantime, TNA has taken some cautious first steps into the house-show business, first running joint shows with **Scott D'Amore**'s Border City Wrestling in Ontario and then NASCAR driver **Hermie Sadler**'s United Wrestling Federation in Virginia and North Carolina. Two nights before ECW's One Night Stand pay-per-view, TNA Hardcore War took place at the extreme promotion's former home—The New Alhambra Arena—in South Philadelphia. Headlined by a surprise four-way tag team match featuring **Team 3D**, **The James Gang**, **A.J. Styles** & **Christopher Daniels**, and NWA World tag champs **America's Most Wanted**, TNA's first foray into Philly resulted in a sellout, and the promotion drew 1,000 people to a show in New Jersey the following night.

Despite these inroads, WWE isn't shaking just yet. While *Impact* earned an average rating of 1.0 during its first nine weeks in its Thursday night time slot, that doesn't come close to WWE numbers. ECW's premiere on the Sci-Fi Channel, for example, scored a 2.7—and that was considered a disappointment inside WWE.

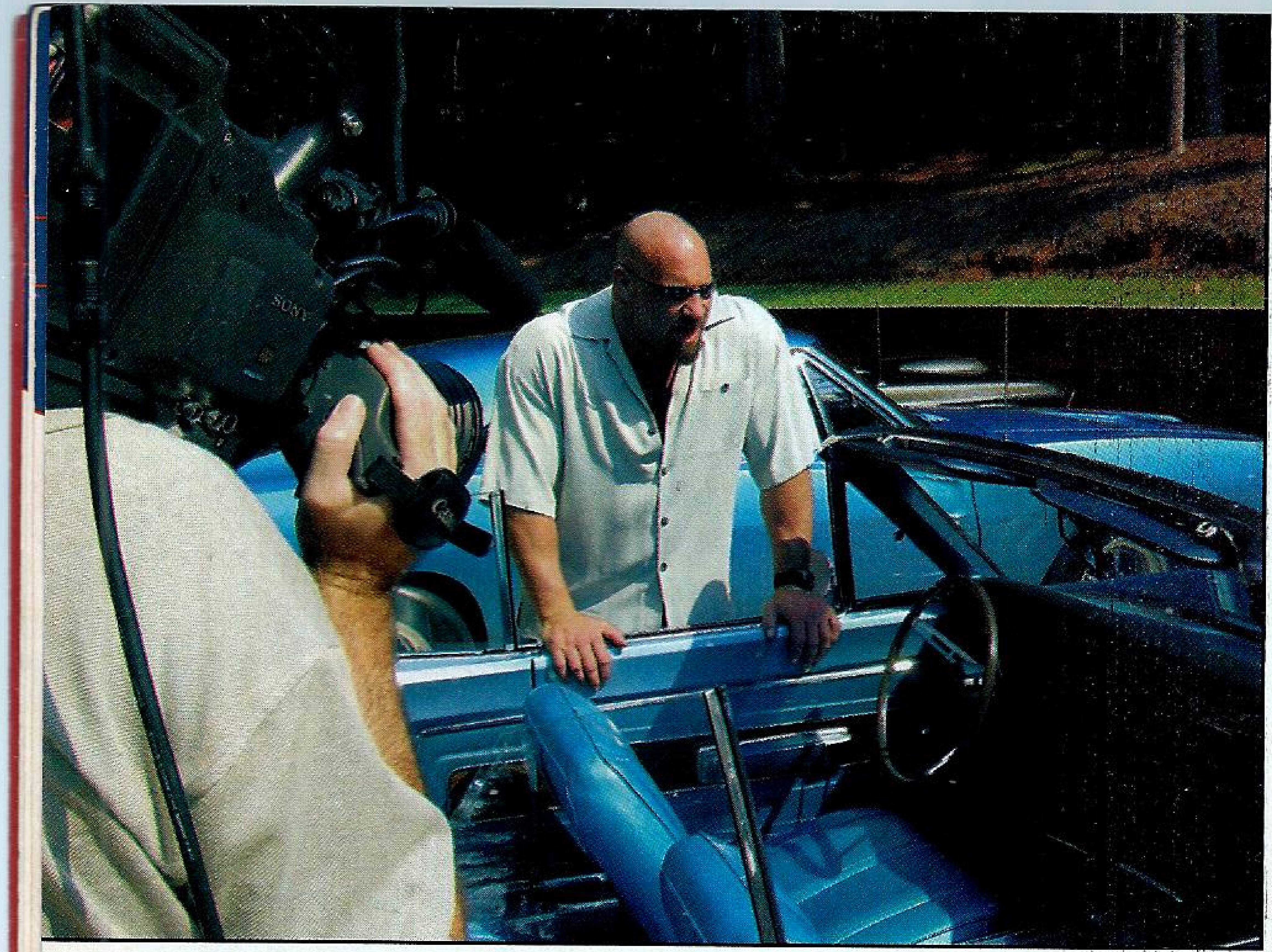
Speaking of ECW on Sci-Fi, that first



TNA goes to war in Philly

Sting vs. Steiner Makes Little Impact On Ratings

Photo by Lee South/TNA Wrestling



Announcing is next for Goldberg

show drew hostile reactions from extreme diehards around the world. Internet message boards and e-mails sent to Inside Wrestling indicate that ECW's premiere was a critical failure. Of course, ECW's first One Night Stand pay-per-view garnered rave reviews, and even this year's One Night Stand II received positive feedback, but there was no love for ECW on Sci-Fi. The zombies and vampires that were on hand to justify ECW's presence on Sci-Fi and the perfectly waxed and cosmetically enhanced Diva who had a wardrobe malfunction while trying to take her clothes off, did not go over with viewers.

All the negative e-mails shared the same theme: ECW with a WWE polish isn't going to work. There's a reason why ECW fans prefer the ageless **Terry Funk** over **John Cena**. ECW fans want a product closer to reality. An e-mail posted on one prominent Web site described ECW on Sci-Fi as "your nerdy dad's ECW."

There's time to turn this around, guys, but turn it around you must.

WWE executives pretend not to care about negative fan feedback, but they do care about negative feedback from Wall Street. Although WWE has posted comfortable earnings during the past few quarters, and has earned praise from financial news outlets ranging from CNN to the Motley Fool Web site, its fourth-quarter report was a disappointment. Why? WWE is still doing only slightly better than it did a year ago.

This simply proves that investing is an expectations game. Live-event attendance and merchandising sales are higher, but lower numbers from advertising and international sales offset those statistics. It's not that WWE is doing poorly—merely that Wall Street expected the company to announce better numbers than it did. During a conference call with investors, CEO **Linda McMahon** tried to put a positive spin on the report, emphasizing that home-video sales have doubled in the past year, sales for video games and toys have risen by 50 percent, and WWE just experienced the largest and most profitable European tour in its history.

Linda McMahon did not comment on the status of **Brock Lesnar**. WWE made a deal with the IWGP champion, allowing him to fulfill his remaining obligations to New Japan. We still don't know what Lesnar agreed to do for WWE in return. And, as of press time, both sides are remaining mum on the subject. Lesnar sued WWE last year, claiming that the non-compete contract he signed upon leaving the company to pursue an NFL career was overly broad and thus too restrictive. The agreement prevented Lesnar from wrestling for another company until 2010. In court, Lesnar's attorney argued that the "Ex-Best Thing" had a right to earn a living in the ring, whether it was in pro wrestling or shootfighting.

Bill Goldberg has always touted his shootfighting, even lobbying for a match against **Tank Abbott** during his days as WCW champion, but no one has had the privilege of watching "Da Man" fend for himself in an octagon, or any other kind of shootfight environment. We still won't. But Goldberg has agreed to be a color commentator for the World Fighting Alliance's upcoming "King Of The Streets" pay-per-view. The event was scheduled to broadcast live on July 22 from The Forum in Los Angeles.

So, what are Goldberg's shootfighting credentials? First, the former WCW champ claims to have been a fan for several years. Second, he owns and operates Extreme Power, a *muay thai* kickboxing facility for adults, children, and competitive fighters. And, third, he is set to star in a remake of the 1980s **Steven Seagal** movie *Half Past Dead.*

"I've been passionate about martial arts my entire life through my own *muay thai* training, my Extreme Power martial arts facility, and now through the myriad of relationships I have with the top fighters in the sport of MMA," Goldberg was quoted as saying in a press release. "When the WFA approached me with this opportunity and I saw the lineup of elite MMA stars fighting for the WFA, I knew this was an opportunity to get more involved in the rapid evolution of this sport. The decision was a no-brainer, and I'm thrilled about my affiliated with the WFA."

Goldberg currently hosts the History Channel's *Auto-Maniac*, which highlights the most exotic and unusual vehicles in the world.

The sight of **Simon Dean** riding around on his little scooter at WWE events makes it easy to forget that he can be an excellent wrestler. Formerly known as Nova, he was an impressive Ohio Valley champion a couple of years ago. Now, Dean has returned to OVW, and he's getting serious—at least somewhat. On the June 10 broadcast of *Ohio Valley Wrestling*, Dean got a shot at new heavyweight champion **C.M. Punk**. Dean talked tough prior to the match, criticizing Punk for going around with his "mascara and Dr. Jekyll act." He finished the promo by saying, "Simon says, you're going to get punk'd!"

As it turned out, Dean came close to getting punked. The champion dominated the health guru for most of the match—until **Shad Gaspard** and his running buddy, **The Neighborhoodie,** interfered. Unfortunately, the bout ended with Punk as the victim of a brutal three-on-one attack. Punk vowed that Dean, Gaspard, and Neighborhoodie would receive a payback.

Dean is also breathing a sigh of relief because **Al Snow** has been sent to the revived ECW. The week before his match against Punk, Dean suffered a humiliating loss to up-and-comer **Shawn Spears**. Dean attacked Spears after the match, prompting color commentator Snow to intervene. Dean smashed Snow with a steel chair as he continued his tirade.

Also in Ohio Valley, **Aaron Stevens** recently stole a victory from **Tank Toland** on television. Toland, who is trying to rebuild his reputation after his embarrassing stint as "James Dick" in the Smackdown brand, desperately needed the win over "The Idol," but it didn't happen. After flipping Stevens with a huracanrana, he went for the "Tank turret." Stevens sidestepped the move, and rolled Toland up for the pinfall. Unfortunately for Tank, the referee was out of position and didn't see Stevens' feet on the ropes.

Brother Runt—formerly known as Spike Dudley—had an unsuccessful outing during his match against new Maryland Championship Wrestling titleholder **Julio Dinero** at the North Point Plaza in Dundalk, Maryland. His fellow TNA star, **Chris Sabin**, had better luck, however, as he defeated **Derek Frazier** for the MCW cruis-

Runt can't come up big

NEWS ANALYSIS

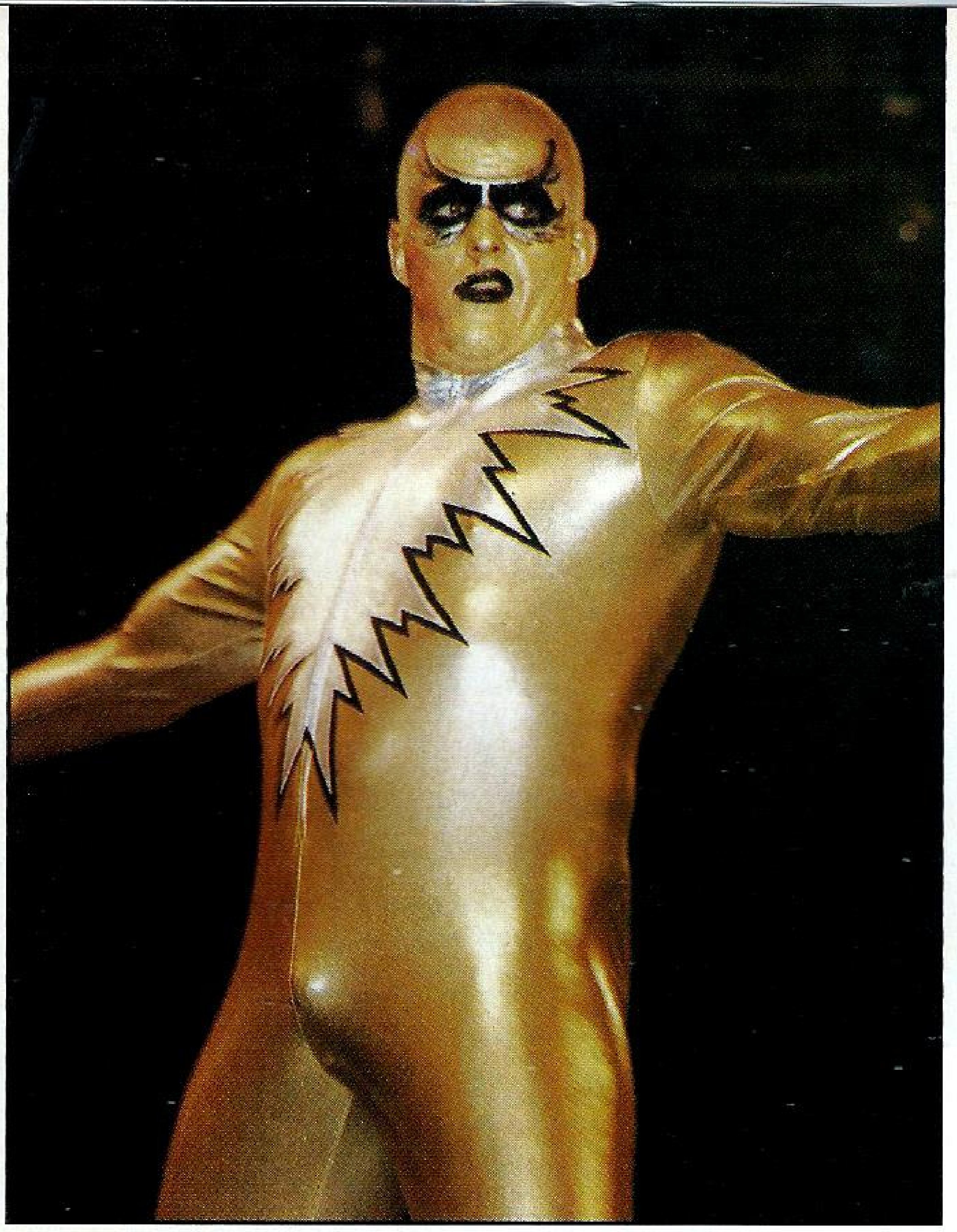
STEINER VS. JOE—HOW INTENSE! Yes, the intensity is back in pro wrestling. There are a lot of critics who like to pan Scott Steiner, but he is most intense talker in the business. So, I have to credit the TNA booking committee for pitting Steiner against the most intense *wrestler* in the business, Samoa Joe. Even if the match is a disappointment, I'm going to enjoy the promos between these two prior to the big event.

ECW ON SCI-FI—HOW WEIRD. I had mixed reactions to ECW's premiere on the Sci-Fi Channel, and I just got the sense this brand is still feeling its way. Premiering a live TV show only two days after a meticulously planned pay-per-view is quite difficult. As the weeks progress, I don't think we'll see zombies, vampires, or baby-faced strippers. We're going to see The Sandman, Mahoney, and Big Guido in all their ugliness.

THE GOLDBERG PHENOMENON. Since "Da Man's" lackluster WWE stint, I haven't seen the word "Goldberg" and "phenomenon" in the same sentence. Yes, I did have a tongue-in-cheek tone when I reported on Bill Goldberg's recent deal to become a color commentator for the WFA, but I have to credit him for maintaining his image and a presence in all forms of entertainment. Here's to Goldberg!

SIMON DEAN'S ANTICS AREN'T HEALTHY. I'm always glad to see WWE mid-carders or under-carders return to Ohio Valley because, at least there, they are able to showcase the personality and talent that warranted them a call-up to WWE in the first place. Dean is more talented than his scooter riding in WWE would suggest—although he still doesn't have a chance against C.M. Punk.

A RISKY BUSINESS. As indicated by my final note on London Publishing photographer Tim Walker, I highly respect the men and women who travel up and down highways and by-ways to chronicle wrestling events around the world. Throughout their careers, George Napolitano, Vern Verna, Joe Zanolle, George Tahinos, Duane Long, and countless others have dedicated themselves to their craft. We thank you.



That's one creepy unemployment line

erweight belt. Also at the show, **Dallas Page** beat **Chris Kanyon**, and MCW referees **Dave "The Wave" McAllister** and **Dee Edwards** beat former WWE referees **Earl** and **Brian Hebner**.

News from the Millennium Wrestling Federation: **Johnny Fabulous** helped **The Canadian Superstars** beat his own teammates, **Beau Douglas** and **Todd Hanson**, for the MWF tag team title in Braintree, Massachusetts … **"Sudden Impact" Dylan Kage** is set to face veterans **"Slyk" Wagner Brown** and TV champ **Eddie Edwards** in an upcoming three-way match. Fortunately for Kage, seasoned manager **Paul Bearer** will be in his corner … The MWF Board of Directors is angry that Commissioner **Brad Von Johnson** recently went on a firing spree, releasing wrestlers against whom he had grudges. The Board invites all wronged wrestlers to take part in an appeals process to seek possible reinstatement.

This 'n' that: WWE recently proved that relatives of top executives will not receive special favors, as they released **Johnny Ace**'s older brother, **Road Warrior Animal**, and **Dusty Rhodes**' son, **Dustin Rhodes** … British fans who are looking forward to Ring of Honor's tour of the U.K. in August might just have to miss stars such as **Samoa Joe**, **A.J. Styles**, **Christopher Daniels**, and **Alex Shelley** because TNA hasn't agreed to let them participate … *Impact* was the second-highest rated program in all of cable on June 1, scoring a 1.8 among the coveted 18- to 34-year-old demographic—second only to the NBA playoffs that night … **The Rock** is slated to appear in his first Disney film, *Game Plan*, which is about a hero quarterback who discovers that he has an eight-year-old daughter … Congratulations to TNA President **Dixie Carter** on the birth of her son … Former NWA World champion **Harley Race** was honored with the Iron Mike Mazurki Award at the Cauliflower Alley Club annual convention.

From the Photo Finish Dept.: Over the years, I have become convinced that being a wrestling photographer is just about the most dangerous profession in the world. I'm not one to take pleasure in the misfortune in others, but I have to chuckle when a hard-working photographer gets mixed up in the action, whether it's **Vern Verna** hitting the floor in Orlando or, in the old days, **Buddy Myers** taking a tumble down in Texas.

But it was no laughing matter when angry manager **Jim Christian** pushed longtime Kappa Publishing photographer **Tim Walker** a little too hard during a recent MCW show. Christian was angry that his team, **The Holy Rollers**, was on the verge of losing an evening gown match to **The Slackers**—and took it out on poor Tim.

"I don't think he meant to hurt me as seriously as he did," said Walker. "I heard something crack in my neck. He injured a vertebra in my neck, and now I have been experiencing numbness in both my right and left arms, and a lot of pain in my right shoulder. As of now, I have intense pain when I try to lift my right arm over my head."

If he had known that Tim had already endured several neck and back surgeries, I don't think even the villainous Christian would have physically manhandled him that night. So, Jim, say you're sorry! And, for the rest of the bold London Publishing photographers, be careful out there! ☐

Another honor for "The King"

JOHNNY NITRO

HEIGHT: 6'0"
WEIGHT: 204
HOMETOWN: Los Angeles, CA
GREATEST MOMENT TO DATE: April 21, 2005—He and former tag team partner Joey Mercury defeat Rey Misterio Jr. and Eddie Guerrero to win the Smackdown World tag team title.
HE DOES IT SO WELL: When Mercury was the muscle behind M-N-M, Nitro provided a smooth fluidity to the tandem. He is a technically sound grappler with a mean streak a mile long.
WHERE HE NEEDS TO IMPROVE: Nitro's meteoric rise to the top of Smackdown's tag division only fueled his massive ego, which, not surprisingly, has lead to some of the setbacks in his career.
PET FINISHER: "The Snapshot"
BIGGEST TEST TO DATE: The shocking split-up of M-N-M and Nitro's subsequent move to the Raw brand has thrust Nitro into a position he has yet to experience in WWE. Although, with Melina by his side, the transition could go much smoother than expected.
OUTLOOK FOR 2006: Johnny Nitro will become an active participant in the increasingly crowded Intercontinental title picture and, before year's end, will likely have gold around his waist. He may dabble in the tag team ranks at some point, but his greatest success in 2006 will come as a singles competitor.
QUICKIE EXPERT ANALYSIS: "Nitro is a smart wrestler who's not above bending the rules to steal a victory. His speed and agility—not to mention Melina—are his greatest attributes. There's no reason he can't immediately become an impact player with Raw and show them what Smackdown's finest are all about!"
—Mark Henry

JAY LETHAL

HEIGHT: 5'9"
WEIGHT: 192
HOMETOWN: Elizabeth, NJ

GREATEST MOMENT TO DATE: December 17, 2005—In a four-corner survival match, Lethal defeated Samoa Joe, Christopher Daniels, and B.J. Whitmer.

HE DOES IT SO WELL: Lethal brings with him a dizzying array of moves and a seemingly endless supply of energy. He wrestles like a seasoned veteran with all the youthful exuberance of a newcomer.

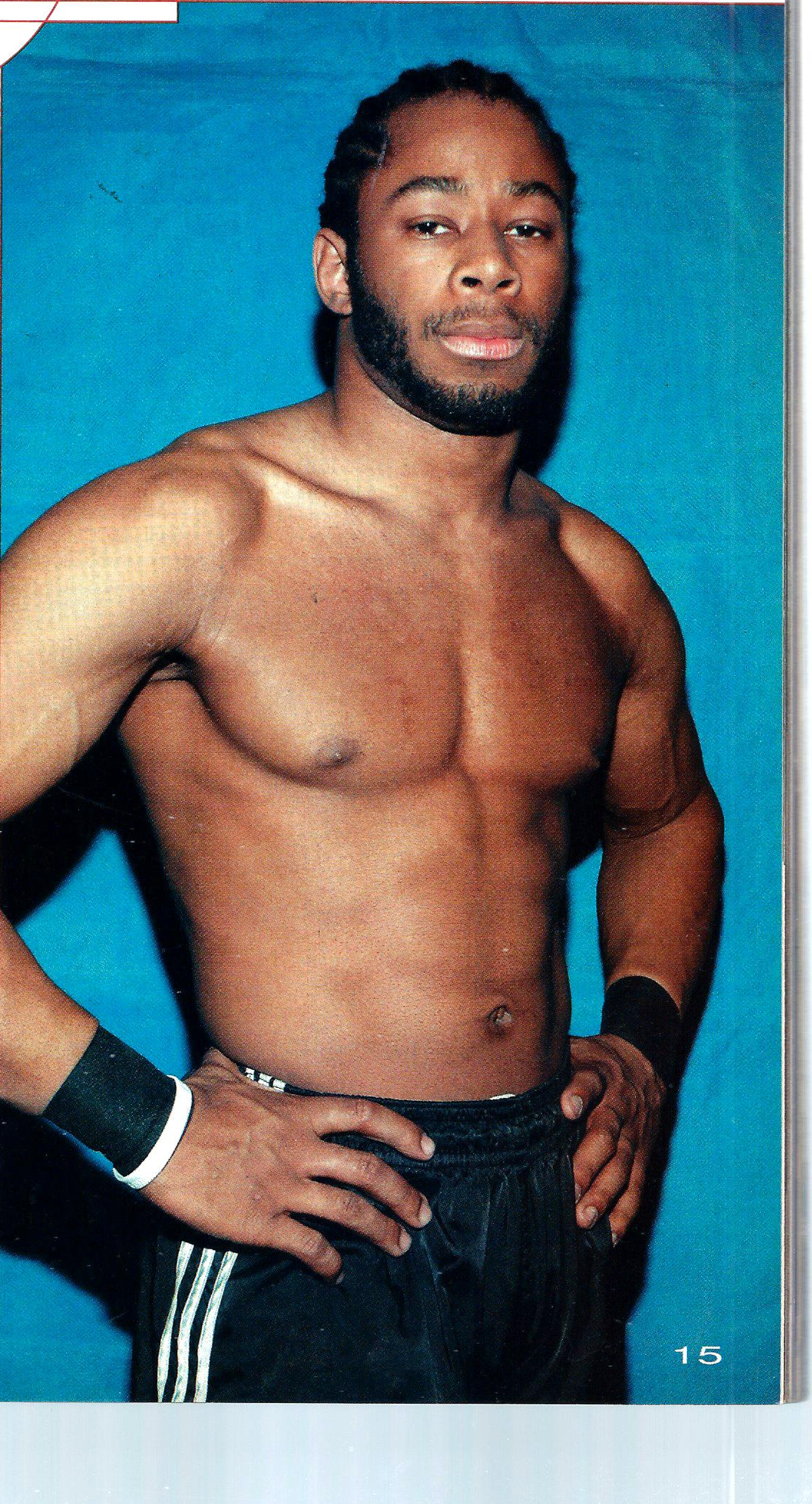
WHERE HE NEEDS TO IMPROVE: Lethal tends to allow his intensity to get the best of him in the ring, leading to more losses than it should. The youngster will need to rein in some of his excitement and choose spots more wisely.

PET FINISHER: The "Lethal Injection"

BIGGEST TEST TO DATE: Distinguishing himself from a growing field of talented X division wrestlers in TNA is Lethal's greatest challenge at this point in his career. While his past success is impressive, Lethal must prove himself worthy of TNA's most competitive division.

OUTLOOK FOR 2006: Lethal should be challenging for the X division title by the end of 2006. This may require him delving into the darker side of his personality, as he has in the past. He and Chris Sabin will be the future of the division after Samoa Joe becomes a serious contender to the NWA World title.

QUICKIE EXPERT ANALYSIS: "Jay can be at the top of the X division in no time flat. All you have to do is watch one of his matches, and you're hooked. This guy is a great wrestler with a huge future ahead of him."
—Sonjay Dutt



on the road

With Dave Lenker

I'VE BEEN TO Pittsburgh just often enough during my life to know I don't want to be in Pittsburgh very often. So I wasn't in the greatest of moods to begin with on the first Monday night in June when the road took me into the Mellon Arena for a night of *Raw* that was to be lowlighted by the induction of Triple-H into the infamous "Kiss My Ass Club" of his real-life father-in-law, Vince McMahon.

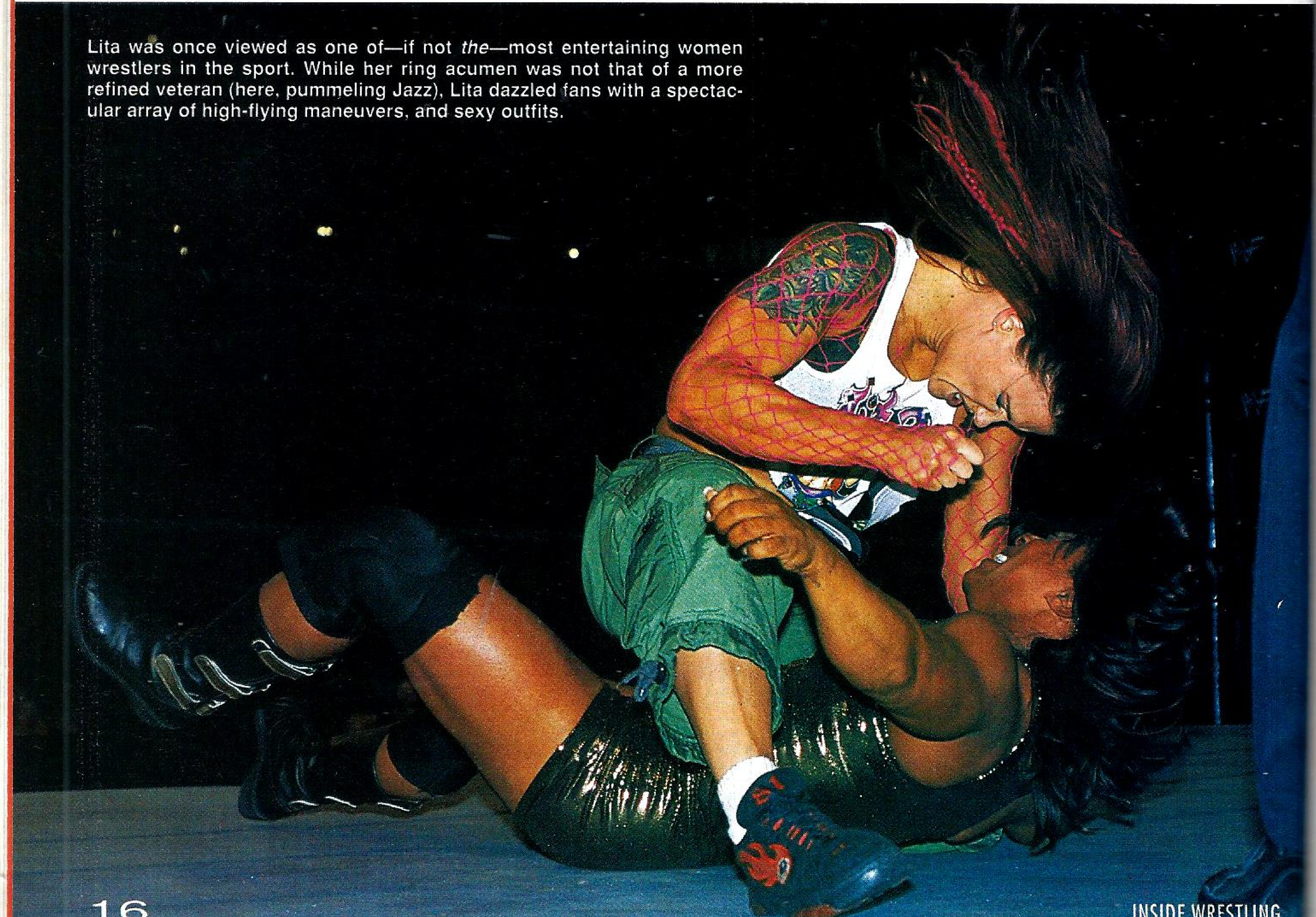
But I'm so enthralled by this resurrection of ECW under the WWE banner that it didn't take much convincing to get me to catch a flight from the right side of Pennsylvania (Philadelphia) to the wrong (west) side. It was the last *Raw* before the One Night Stand pay-per-view, so there figured to be a lot of chaos, and there sure was. Oddly enough, however, as I made my way out of Mellon just after midnight, there wasn't really anything ECW on my mind. It was a cheap shot fired by ECW's own mad scientist himself, Paul Heyman, that got me thinking.

As he insulted Mick Foley, Heyman offered his own greeting to Lita, who was just appearing on the entrance ramp with Edge. He referred to her in the same way he had referred to Foley, calling her, a "hairy prostitute." Cheap by the standards of Heyman—who's capable of so much more creativity—but an insult that's not so far off. What in the blue hell has happened to Lita exactly?

I know the answer, of course. Edge happened to her. Actually, Edge more than "happened" to her, but let's keep this column family-friendly. The Edge and Matt Hardy saga happened to her. And as smug, sultry, and lusty as she may appear at Raw shows around the world these days, she really can't be all that, *uh,* satisfied, can she?

It was during WWE's first PPV foray into Puerto Rico on January 9 of last year (New Year's Revolution) when Lita, riding another strong wave of momentum as a fan favorite, blew out a knee against Trish Stratus. The match ended abruptly, the then-evil Stratus got the belt back, and Lita was on the shelf. She's hardly gotten off that shelf since.

Seriously, Candice Michelle and Maria Kanellis log more ring time these days than Lita, and that's not a good thing.



Lita was once viewed as one of—if not *the*—most entertaining women wrestlers in the sport. While her ring acumen was not that of a more refined veteran (here, pummeling Jazz), Lita dazzled fans with a spectacular array of high-flying maneuvers, and sexy outfits.

Today, Lita is little more than a glorified valet basking in the notoriety of Edge. Injury and perhaps malaise have forced the former women's champion into a role more befitting a Diva search runner-up—not a talented female wrestler.

Most of her physicality (thank you, J.R., for giving us that ridiculous word) involves low-blowing Edge's opponent or launching a Lita-canrana that somehow ends up mistakenly taking down her boyfriend. Can you even remember the last time Lita had a serious one-on-one match with ... *anyone?*

It was just six years ago that Lita was rubbing elbow-pads with The Rock at the main-event level and feuding with the uber-hated Stephanie McMahon. For those who didn't see her in what will apparently go down as her athletic prime, Lita 2000 was somewhat similar to John Cena of today, although she was almost universally loved and respected by fans.

Like Cena, Lita wasn't (isn't?) too technically sound inside the ropes, but she had a few flashy signature moves and could offer up an entertaining match against the right opponent (or even a substandard opponent if the match didn't last too long). You got the feeling she'd get better in time. Like Cena, she also had the intangible "it" factor that made her special. I even remember a bright cover of *PWI* on which we labeled her the WWF's "it" girl. Okay, maybe the peek-a-boo thong (before that became fashionable in our society) had a little something to do with her everywoman appeal.

Sure, the heel turn she pulled off to join Edge on screen last summer was necessary and very effective at the time, but, all in all, the past year has been a forgettable one for a Diva whose appearances used to rank among the true highlights of WWE programming each week. She's become very shapely wallpaper. Her interference still nets Edge a key win here and there, and her taking FUs from Cena, chokeslams from The Big Show, and the like is sure to draw a big reaction from the cheap seats, but think about this: Couldn't her role be filled almost as capably by an also-ran from the latest Diva search with an overflowing set of double-Ds?

Very quietly, in case you haven't been paying attention, the WWE women's division is shifting ever so slightly back toward respectability. Mickie James is a fantastic all-around talent. Trish Stratus is as gorgeous and consistent as she's ever been. Beth Phoenix has shown a lot in only a few months. Melina can do a hell of a lot more than splits. And Victoria is the most underrated and underappreciated female star in WWE. Sure, we still have Maria, Candice, and Torrie cavorting around in their lingerie and trying to play the roles of women wrestlers, but shift Jillian Hall to Raw and Vince McMahon would have himself the deepest legitimate women's roster he's had in a long time.

Imagine what Lita could add to this mix. She need not even forsake her relationship with Edge to do so. They could draw each other into their respective feuds and cause even more trouble than they're already causing.

Maybe WWE has decided that Lita is simply too injury-prone to insert into the women's division on a regular basis. Keep in mind that, in addition to her knee problems, Lita once broke her neck and missed a year of ring time as a result. Maybe Lita herself has made it clear that she no longer wants to put her body at risk every night and has enough stroke to get her way. Whatever the reason, it just seems wrong to me.

It was odd, in a sense, that it was Heyman who took that cheap verbal shot at Lita on that night in Pittsburgh. It was, after all, Heyman who first introduced us to Lita, when she was known as Miss Congeniality. She was nothing more than a bit player on the lower end of the ECW mid-card all those many years ago. Now she's quickly devolving into a bit player in WWE, albeit at a much higher position on Raw cards. In a promotion known for wasting a lot of talent, she's quickly becoming one of the biggest wastes of all. □

the insider

By Brandi Mankiewicz

(The opinions expressed in "The Insider" are those of Brandi Mankiewicz alone and do not necessarily reflect the opinions of anyone else on the staff of this magazine.)

WHAT IS WRONG with this world? Every day I see something new on TV or in the newspaper that defies logic and ultimately pisses me off. I sit here, perplexed, wearing my favorite T-shirt emblazoned with a snarky Peter Griffin portrait in the iconic pose of Che Guevara (okay, if you're perplexed about the names Peter Griffin and/or Che Guevara, you piss me off, too. Go Google these names, dammit. Learn pop culture and history). Whatever happened to passionate defiance and good humor? I guess I'll never know.

Wrestling's no better. It's like the *Night Of The Living Dead* these days. There's an ECW revival taking place for no good reason; TNA's trying its best to rehash the early-1990s with dinosaurs like Scott Steiner and Sting; hell, even Vince McMahon has declared himself "God" to rule over this hedonistic underworld of mainstream sports' bastard child. Well, if Vinnie Mac can be blasphemous, so can I. I'm the "Queen of All Evil" for a reason, after all. In these times of turmoil, I turn to the one leader who never steered me wrong. The one who I call my champion: Gino Hernandez.

Gino Hernandez?! I can hear your snickers now. *Like, what can a dead guy do for us now?* is what I know you're going to say. Well, read on ...

Every time there is something wrong in wrestling or something that just screams for someone to come set everything straight again by creating even more evil than what is already present, I think of Gino. So, since I'm already sharing the penthouse suite in Hell with "Fallen Angel" Christopher Daniels in my afterlife, a little blasphemy won't hurt a bit. In fact, it might get me and C.D. some extra air conditioning. Here's my first installment of "What Would Gino Do?"

Topic: Vince McMahon declares himself God.

WWGD?: *Ah*, this is old hat for the "Handsome Halfbreed From Highland Park." Back in the day, the Von Erichs though of themselves as the second coming of the Roman gods with Fritz being a Zeus-like figure, handing down his well-chiseled sons to rule over Texas. Gino was the full-on antagonist, doing his best to prove that evil will always triumph over good when good gets too full of itself. While the Von Erichs were too busy kissing babies and saving Reunion Arena, Gino was busy collecting gold belts, money, and women. Sadly, Vince didn't learn from this. When Vince isn't out there performing, he's busy causing trouble behind the scenes, setting up various wrestlers to fail just because he can. That's an abuse of power of which Gino would be proud,

"What Would Gino Do?"—pretty much anything he wanted. It's a guarantee that, were the dearly departed "Handsome Halfbreed From Highland Park" still with us, wrestling would make much more sense, and those who don't belong in a ring would be washing cars.

but even *he* would know when to stop. If Gino were in charge, he'd set every top star from John Cena to Kurt Angle against each other and then quietly slip in to take all of the gold while everyone else was busy fighting amongst themselves—and Gino would make damn sure the company made tons of money from it.

Topic: Ring of Honor dominates the Northeast independent scene and continues to expand.

WWGD?: Gino would know this would be best handled by his underling, Dennis Coraluzzo, the infamous New Jersey promoter who has been more talked about after his death than before it. Dennis would immediately acquire a Pennsylvania State promoter's license and start promoting in ROH's backyard using ROH's strongest castaway ... namely Rob Feinstein of RF Video fame. While ROH is busy in a pissing contest with what's left of CZW, the new Feinstein-led promotion would bring back the original concept of ROH and make it competitive and fun again. Running monthly shows in the Murphy Rec Center, Dennis would hold raffles for the fans to win fantastic prizes from RF Video. I'm sure Dennis would enlist his friends from his life—such as Jeff Jarrett and Jim Cornette—to put on some of the best shows in the area and help run ROH right out of its home territory. Wait ... didn't TNA run a house show in Philly in June? Don't both Jarrett and Cornette work there? *Hmm* ... maybe Dennis is already at work.

Topic: Marks who follow me in the mall only to ask inane questions about my uncle, the illustrious, inebriated Matt "Don't Light A Match" Brock.

WWGD?: Gino would handle this like a champ. He'd march these marks right into the nearest store and make them buy him stuff. Oh, and after shopping, a little food would be needed as well. Yes, the lowly fan would pay for everything. How else do you think the name "mark" came about? Unfortunately for me, my case of marks gave me the creeps so I hightailed it into the nearest high-class store that was, thankfully, too high class for them to enter.

Topic: Nameless, untalented bimbos wasting time on *Raw* and *Smackdown*.

WWGD?: Gino would do plenty. He'd handle this epidemic of Frankenhooters by marching them all into his palatial estate for a real Diva search of the *Playboy* kind. Of course, I'm excluding real wrestlers like Victoria, Trish Stratus, Mickie James, and Beth Phoenix. I'm talking about the rest of the bunch. Well, all except for Michelle McCool because she's not exactly pretty or worth the effort. After about a week of tryouts, the lucky Divas that survive would then get the awesome prize of cleaning up all of the scattered bottles of Cristal and other assorted party items. Then, after washing, waxing, and detailing his Porsche, the girls would all be informed that their services would no longer be needed because of payroll cutbacks. Why keep a gaggle of nondescript Frankenhooters when all they do is take up space and deplete the world's oxygen supply? I hope some of these bimbos can dance, because it may be their only chance to ever see themselves on TV again.

Whew! I feel better now. I know I'm in good hands when I know that somewhere, somehow Gino Hernandez is watching over me. I can sleep soundly tonight. ☐

How do we deal with the talentless crop of eye-candy (such as the vapid Candice Michelle) WWE keeps churning out? Gino would know. After a rigorous series of tryouts, the half-wits would be granted the pleasure of being Gino's personal servants ... before getting kicked to the curb.

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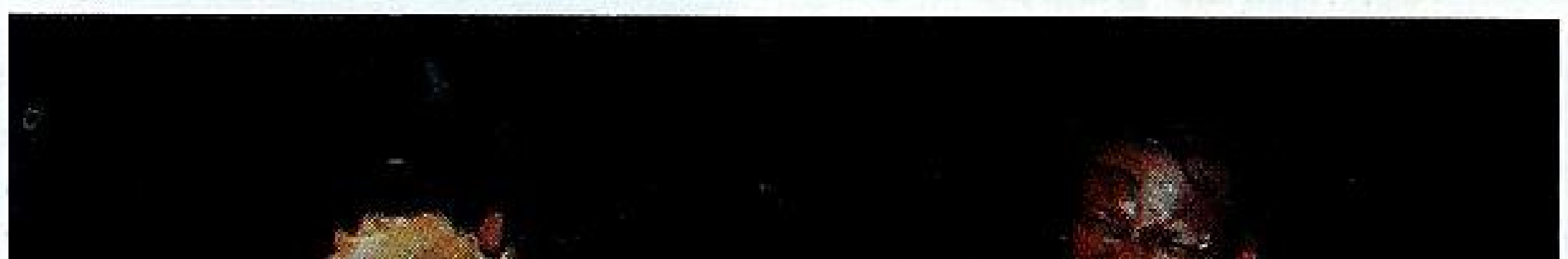
RON KILLINGS

THE FORMER NWA heavyweight champion is one of the most athletically—and lyrically—gifted men ever to wear the championship belt ... A native of Charlotte, North Carolina, Killings discovered wrestling as a way out of a gang lifestyle of drugs and crime ... Trained under Manny Fernandez and made his pro debut in 1995 ... Beat A.J. Styles to win the NCW TV title, which became the NWA-Wildside TV title *("A great rivalry was born")* ... Signed a WWF developmental contract and was assigned to Memphis Championship Wrestling *("Memphis wasn't ready for a guy like me")* ... Won the MCW Southern heavyweight title in a battle royal, lastly eliminating Jerry Lawler in April 2000 ... Won his second MCW title with a win over Joey Abs ... Joined the WWF as K-Kwick in late-2000 and began teaming with Road Dogg *("The Sun-Tanned Superman and the D-O-double-G got rowdy")* ... Won the hardcore title twice in 24 hours in February 2001, but lost it back to Crash Holly immediately each time ... Briefly competed as K. Malik Shebazz in XPW ... Agreed to join the fledgling TNA in spring 2002 ... Began competing under his given name of Ron Killings *("I had to stop frontin' and get real")* ... Established himself as TNA's breakout star when he defeated Ken Shamrock to win the NWA heavyweight championship ... Made a name for himself as a fighting champion, defending the title against the likes of Jerry Lynn, Low Ki, and Curt Hennig *("A champ's only as good as his competition, right?")* ... Lost the title in November 2002 to Jeff Jarrett ... Turned his back on the fans several months later, attacking then-fan favorite Jarrett and power-bombing him off the top rope *("Sometimes you have to take drastic measures to get a title shot")* ... After briefly teaming with Nelson "Viscera" Frazier and Kid Kash, Killings formed a friendship with Konnan ... They eventually aligned with B.G. James and formed the 3 Live Kru *("Three brothers from different mothers")* ... 3LK built up a sizeable fan following with weeks of comedy skits but did very little in the ring, as they were seemingly more interested in clowning around than wrestling ... The team eventually moved into title contention when Killings won a gauntlet match to earn his team a title shot ... In November 2003, the 3 Live Kru beat Simon Diamond, Johnny Swinger, and Glen Gilberti to win the NWA tag team title ... Lost the belts in an upset to Legend and Kevin Northcutt in January 2004 ... Re-discovered his hunger for the NWA heavyweight title once old rival Styles regained the belt in spring 2004 ... Defeated Styles, Chris Harris, and Raven in a four-man "Deadly Draw" match to win his second NWA title *("In a lot of ways, that win was even sweeter than the first")* ... Unfortunately for Killings, that second reign lasted a mere two weeks until he once again dropped the strap to Jarrett in a "King Of The Mountain" match ... Beat TNA newcomer "The Outlaw" Kip James in a featured match at Slammiversary 2005 ... Spent the majority of 2005 concentrating on tag matches and feuding with James and Monty Brown, The Diamonds in the Rough, and Team Canada ... Recorded a rap single, "What's Up," that he adopted as his entrance music *("Wrestler, dancer, singer—I'm a triple threat")* ... Was recruited into Sting's Army at Lockdown 2006 where he teamed with Sting, Styles, and Rhino to beat Jarrett, Harris, James Storm, and Scott Steiner in a "War Games" match ... Qualified for the "King Of The Mountain" match at Slammiversary 2006 with a win over Brown ... Killings remains one of the most persistent contenders for the NWA World title in TNA and is determined to win it for a third time *("I've got no worries. It's just a matter of time before 'The Truth' gets his bling back. What's up!")*



Ron Killings has been to the top of TNA, as well as the bottom of the championship rankings. Those experiences have given the charismatic Killings a better perspective on what it takes to be a world champion.

RON KILLINGS

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By Scott Teal

The Fabulous Moolah

Women's wrestling has enjoyed a renaissance of sorts in recent years. Athletes such as Trish Stratus, Mickie James, and Gail Kim, however, may not have had a place in professional wrestling were it not for the trail blazed by women in the past. Perhaps the most well-known pioneer of women's professional wrestling is Lillian Ellison, better known as "The Fabulous Moolah."

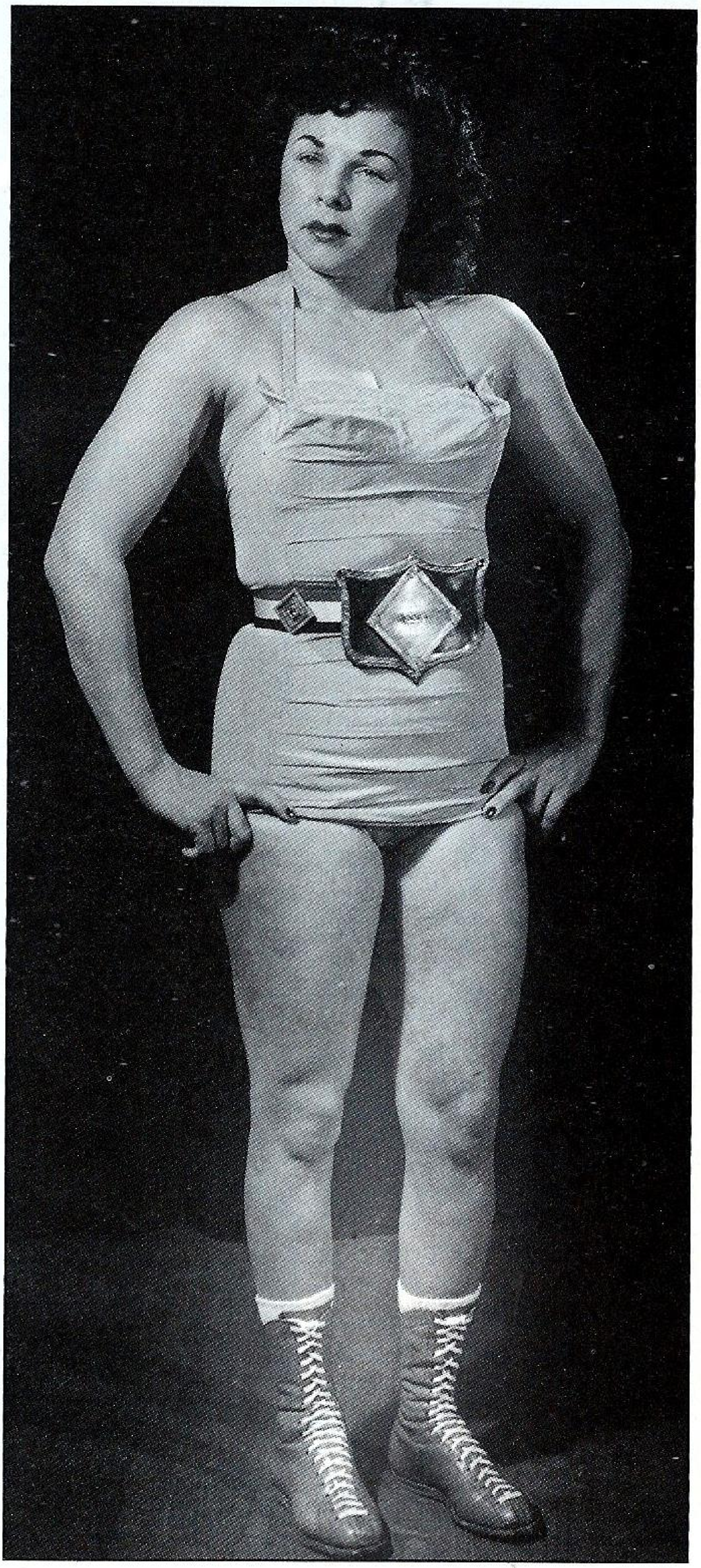
Ellison, a South Carolina native, was drawn to competition and athletics since childhood. "I loved competition sports and won some medals in county fairs for broad jumping and running during grammar school," Moolah said recently. But, that would be the case of anyone who grew up with 12 brothers. "When I got to junior high, I played baseball, volleyball, anything rough."

Moolah was just eight years old when her mother died, creating a void in her life that she would fill with wrestling. "To get my mind off of it, my dad took me to the matches in Columbia," she recalled. "Mildred Burke was the first woman wrestler I ever saw, and I remember telling my dad I could beat her."

While tagging along with her brother, who had won a trip to Johannesburg, South Africa, the future champion met the man who created a career path for her in the wrestling world, promoter Tiger Simpson. "When I asked him if I could wrestle," she said, "he gave me a tryout. I did well enough that he gave me about six matches. When he asked me if I was going to use my real name I said, 'No, it sounds sissy.' I had long, red hair, so he called me 'Slave Girl.'"

"Slave Girl" continued to train under Simpson in South Africa, after which she returned to the States and met Johnny Long, a pro wrestler who refined her ring technique and taught her even more about the business of wrestling—and whom she later married. From there, she went to Boston to see Billy Wolfe, who booked most of the women wrestlers during that time period. "Billy told me to go home to Columbia and gain about 25 pounds," Moolah said. "I took three vitamin shots a week and ate all the starchy and sweet foods I could."

When Wolfe came to Columbia four months later, "Slave Girl" weighed 148 pounds. "But, nobody knew me," she said. "Not even Nell Stewart, who had been really nice to me in Boston. I walked in and said, 'Well, do I have to knock the door down or can I come in?' When she asked me who I was, I said, 'Nellie, don't you remember me? I



was in Boston three months ago.' She was real happy to see me, but couldn't believe I had gained so much weight."

It was while wrestling in the southern territories that she would meet life-long friend Mae Young. "Mae is the person who taught me how to wrestle," Moolah said. "My first match was a battle royal in Charlotte in 1950. I didn't stay with Billy Wolfe too long because I didn't like his way of doing things."

"Slave Girl's" life was changing drastically, as well. After divorcing Long, she got a call from wrestling impresario Jack Pfefer, who brought her up north as a valet for Buddy Rogers. She would marry Buddy Lee, another pro wrestler, and the couple would move back to Columbia, where she had a home.

"Slave Girl's" career got a its first big boost on September 18, 1956, when she won the women's championship in Baltimore. "I won three matches in the one-night tournament, beating Judy Grable to win the belt. A commissioner told me that I was 'fabulous' and should change my ring name, because 'Slave Girl' portrays a different image from a champion. I changed my name to the 'Fabulous Moolah' and held the belt for 28 years."

The Fabulous Moolah is credited with revolutionizing women's wrestling. Her phenomenal 28-year title reign will never be matched by anyone—male or female—and is undoubtedly the cornerstone of her legacy.

Moolah held the belt until 1984, when she was dethroned by the WWF's top female star, Wendi Richter, at Madison Square Garden. But Moolah would gain revenge, returning six months later as "The Spider Lady" and reclaiming the title.

Under the banner of Lillian Ellison Girl Wrestling Enterprises, Moolah trained many of the most well-known women wrestlers, including Joyce Grable, Sherri Martel, and all of the female midget wrestlers. At one time, she was booking 42 women around the world. Moolah later changed the name of her school to All-American Wrestling Promotions after she began training men.

Today, The Fabulous Moolah lives with fellow wrestlers Mae Young and Diamond Lil at the end of "Moolah Drive" on a 42-acre estate in Columbia that includes a 13-room home, two lakes with a row of houses, and a gym equipped with a full-size wrestling ring. Her only daughter wrestled in the late-'60s and early-'70s as Darling Pat Sherry. In her spare time, Moolah enjoys freshwater fishing and loves being in and around the water. While her current position in the industry is more limited today than in past years—essentially sporadic appearances for WWE and legends events—her legacy still remains as arguably the greatest female wrestler in the sport's history. ☐

plain speaking

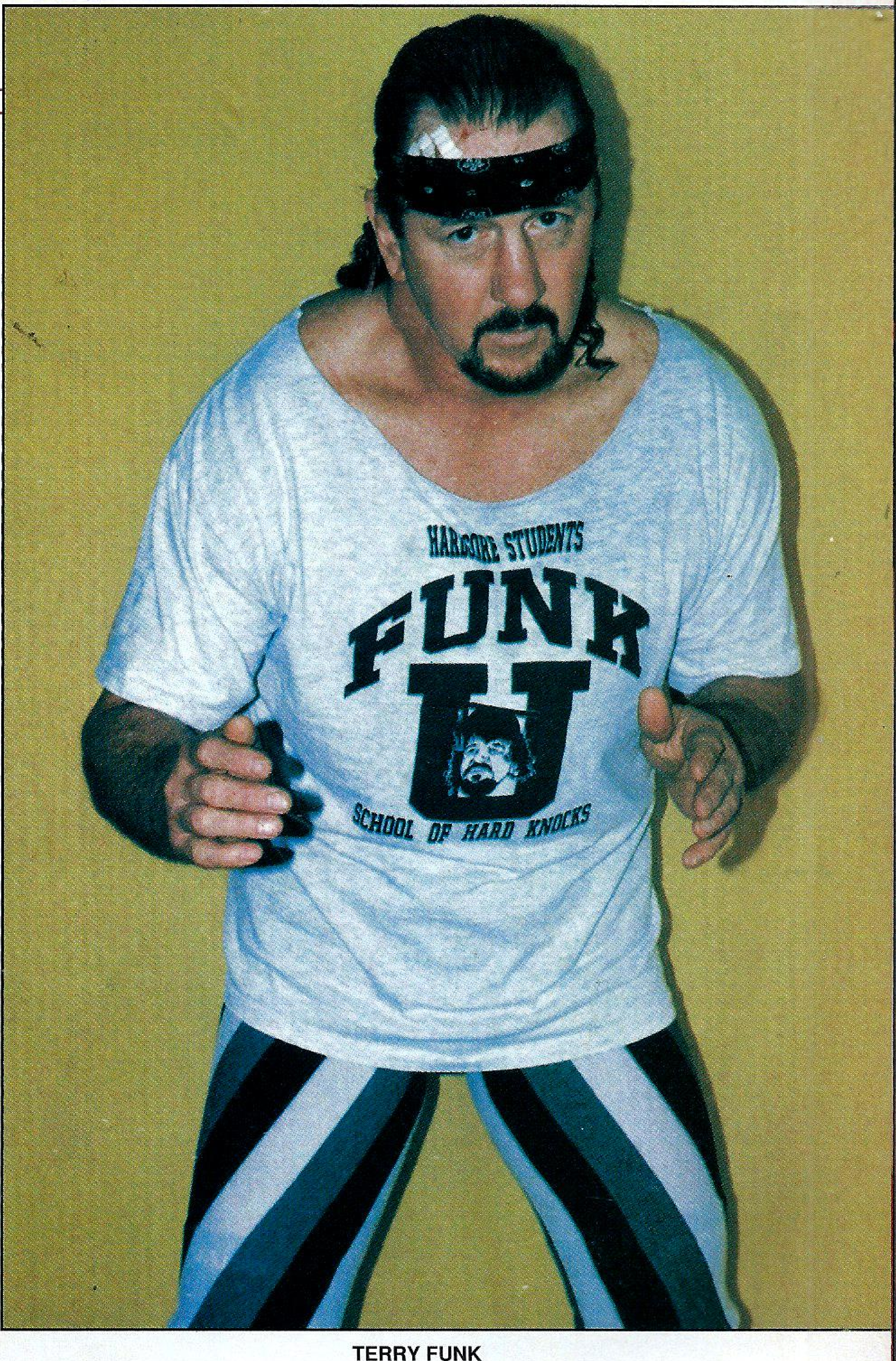
With Matt Brock

Harder than nails, veteran wrestling reporter Matt Brock has logged more miles covering wrestling than any other journalist. Every month Matt will travel to the sport's hotbeds, reporting everything he sees without fear or favor

KEVIN NASH

ORLANDO, FL: I don't know what Kevin Nash has on TNA management, but it has to be something incriminating. Nash is back once again in TNA, and now he's trying his best to bury the company's X division. Maybe I'm wrong, but it seems to me it's not particularly wise to have a frequently injured part-time wrestler running around and badmouthing the company's signature division. ¶Some might say I'm being premature, that I should wait and see how this whole things works out before I criticize it. Bunk. Listen, I don't care if Chris Sabin, Sonjay Dutt, and Samoa Joe take turns beating Nash into the canvas. Just having him running around calling the X competitors midgets is doing damage. ¶Remember when Nash and his old buddy Scott Hall trashed WCW, saying the company wasn't cool and that the fan favorites were overrated? There was a morsel of truth to their argument, and the fans recognized that. And even after the NWO fell apart, the fans still saw WCW as un-cool and the good guys as overrated. I wouldn't go so far as to say he "killed" WCW, but he certainly didn't help the company get better. A little bit of Nash goes a long way, and just a tiny bit of Nash is more than TNA needs at this stage of the game.

PHILADELPHIA, PA: Figured the best way to gauge John Q. Public's opinion to this much-ballyhooed ECW reunion was to hit the old ECW fans where they live—a handful of seedy gin mills located within staggering distance of the old ECW Arena in South Philly. ¶Will Welsh accompanied me as I gathered my research, only because I find it safer to travel with a former Marine when going into some of these joints. "They ought to call it WWECW, because it's sure as hell not going to be the ECW I remember," said one man in his early-30s, wearing a black T-shirt with some rock band's name emblazoned on the front. "The ECW I used to love was all about going against the rules and defying authority, not being a cog in the WWE machine." Another guy in a bar down the street had a similar opinion. "ECW was unique because it was all about the fans having fun, treating wrestling with respect, and a bunch of wrestlers willing to spill blood to entertain the crowd," he said. "WWE stopped being fun when Austin and The Rock left. This ECW experiment is going to be a disaster." ¶That seems to be the consensus here in Philly, the home of the original ECW. I asked Will if he was of the same opinion. "Matt," he said, "these fans saw ECW 10 years ago when there was nothing else like it anywhere. It's going to take a lot for these fans to accept it as the real deal." Philly fans with low expectations? Not likely.



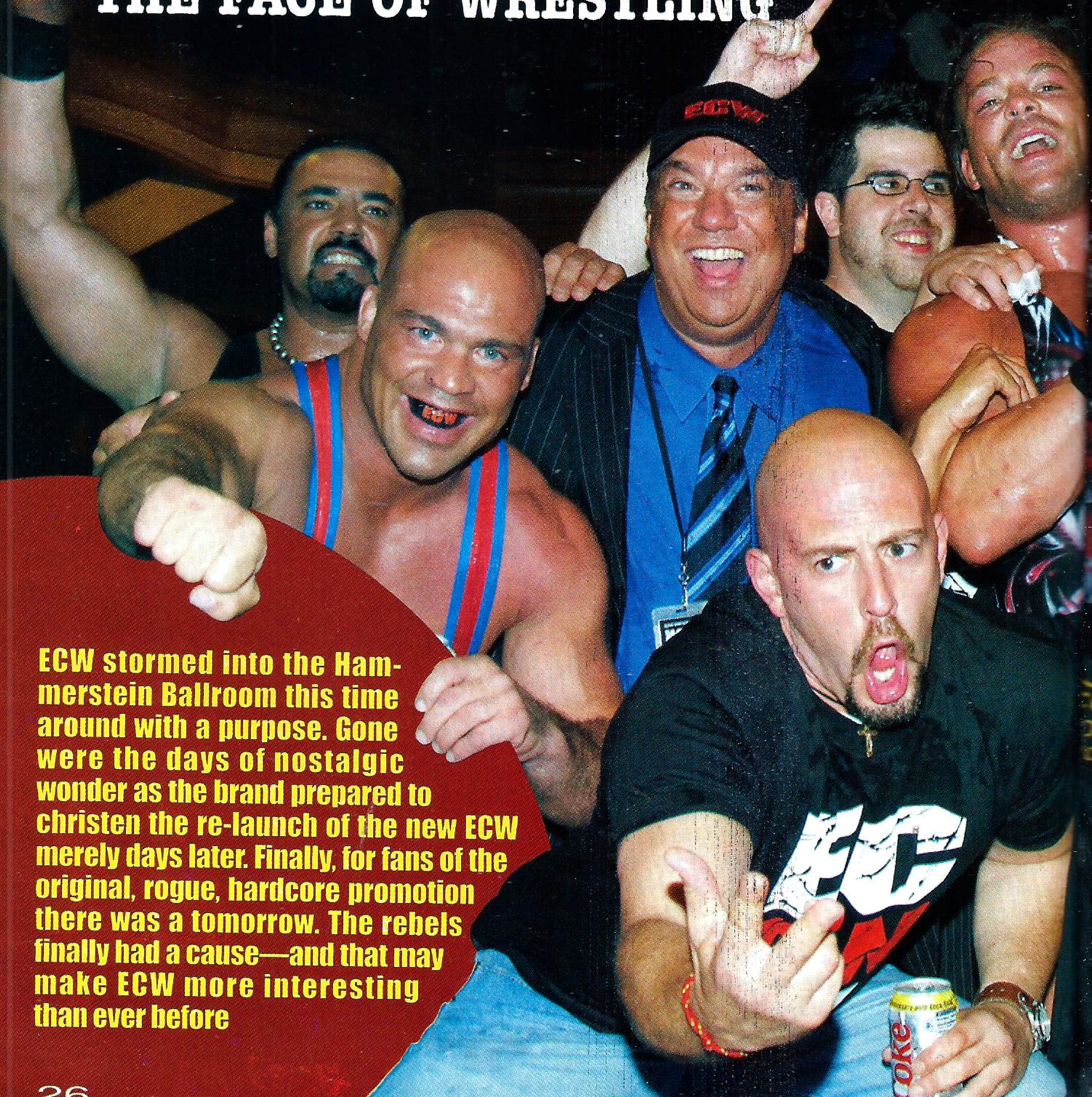
TERRY FUNK

PITTSBURGH, PA: Met up with Terry Funk after the *Raw* broadcast that saw him join a cadre of ECW alums in beating down John Cena. "The Funker" seemed pretty darn proud of himself, despite the fact it was basically a six-on-one mugging. Heck, even The Spirit Squad gives better odds than that. ¶"So, Matt, are you ready for one more run?" Funk asked, looking every day of his 60-plus years. I've still got a few years on Terry, but I'm not out there trying to compete with men one-third my age. I asked Terry if he thought he was tarnishing his great legacy by continuing to still go out there and wrestle at an age when he should be at home bouncing grandkids (or great-grandkids) on his knee. "Legacy?" Funk chuckled. "My legacy doesn't pay the bills like a fat ECW contract does." We all do what we have to do to pay the taxman, but I always thought Terry had more dignity than he's showing these days. ¶Tell you what: I saw the fighting spirit I always associated with Funk in someone else tonight. Beth Phoenix suffered a broken jaw early in her match against Victoria and still managed to fight on and win the match. The right side of her face was visibly swelling, and she was in obvious pain, but she stayed focused on the match and found a way to win. Doctors are telling her she could be out of action for up to two months, but she's already looking into finding a protective device that could get her back in the ring much sooner. ¶Terry Funk, I'm quite sure, is proud.

WHEELING, WV: They always say the final year of an extended contract is when an athlete performs at his best, and that's definitely the case with Mark Henry. ¶Henry signed a 10-year deal back in 1996 and has signed a much shorter contract extension, and over the past few weeks he has been savagely destroying his opponents. Kurt Angle and Chris Benoit have already gone down with internal injuries, and a local kid took the beating of his life in Pittsburgh. ¶Henry is a rudderless ship of destruction. He is an extremely dangerous and capable wrestler, but he's not a legitimate world title contender. Former manager Daivari is now much more focused on The Great Khali and Henry is basically fending for himself, beating people up without focus or purpose. ¶Henry needs a change. He needs a manager. He needs a mission. And his opponents need to make sure their health insurance is paid up before stepping into the ring with him. □

EXTREME SUCCESS:

ONE NIGHT THAT CHANGED THE FACE OF WRESTLING



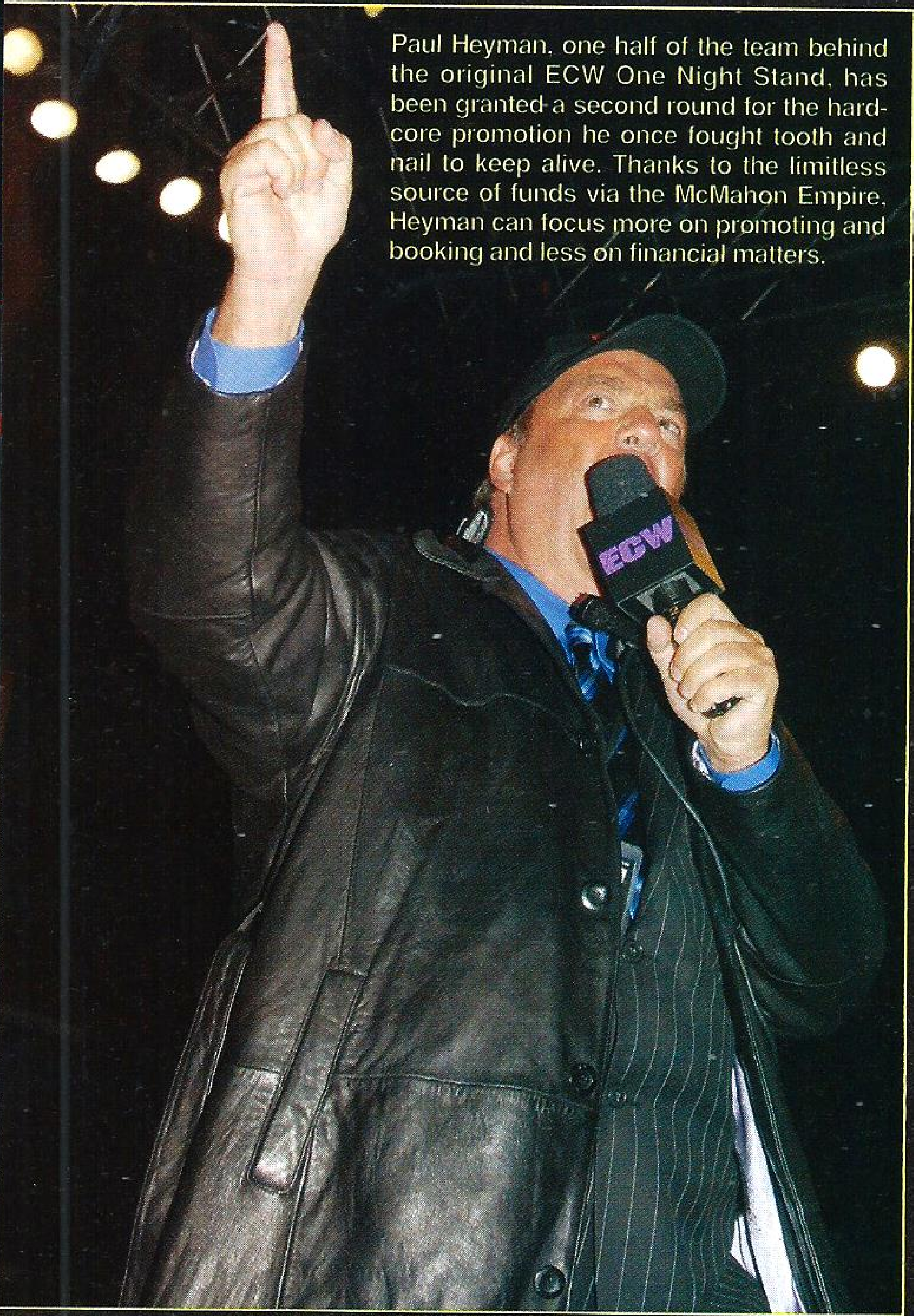
ECW stormed into the Hammerstein Ballroom this time around with a purpose. Gone were the days of nostalgic wonder as the brand prepared to christen the re-launch of the new ECW merely days later. Finally, for fans of the original, rogue, hardcore promotion there was a tomorrow. The rebels finally had a cause—and that may make ECW more interesting than ever before

Photos by George Napolitano

By Will Welsh

BY DEFINITION, A one-night stand is only supposed to last, well, one night. They aren't supposed to last two nights, repeat themselves a year after the fact, or give birth to a long-term relationship. At their very core, one-night stands are meant to satiate an appetite in the here and now without any kind of regard for the future. Their purpose is to provide instant gratification. Most of the time, anyone looking for anything more than that from a one-night stand is in for a disappointment.

Every once in a while, however, what was once planned to be a one-night stand turns into something else: a second date occurs, a relationship forms, and, eventually, a future is born. Last year's ECW One Night Stand pay-per-view is an example of how a one-night stand can blossom into something wholly unexpected.



Paul Heyman, one half of the team behind the original ECW One Night Stand, has been granted a second round for the hardcore promotion he once fought tooth and nail to keep alive. Thanks to the limitless source of funds via the McMahon Empire, Heyman can focus more on promoting and booking and less on financial matters.

The brainchild of Rob Van Dam and Paul Heyman, last year's One Night Stand was an opportunity for WWE to cash in on the wave of ECW nostalgia that had crested following the release of the *Rise And Fall Of ECW* DVD. It was never meant to spawn a second pay-per-view—and it certainly wasn't meant to give rise to the rebirth of the extreme.

Yet, that's exactly what it did—and this year's One Night Stand was the jumping off point.

Perhaps not as nostalgic as last year's ONS, this year's pay-per-view may very well go down as the more historically important of the two. If last year's hadn't worked out, WWE was out virtually nothing. WWE executives could've chalked it up as an experiment gone wrong and moved forward without thinking about ECW ever again.

This year's ONS, coming only two nights before ECW's return to national television on the Sci-Fi Channel, held more long-term importance for WWE, ECW, and the wrestling industry in general than last year's show. The birth of WWE's third brand (because calling ECW anything else at this point would just be wrong) not only holds great implications for WWE's bottom line, it also holds great importance over TNA and Ring of Honor. Thanks to the need for a brand new roster, it also affects the lives of more than a few professional wrestlers.

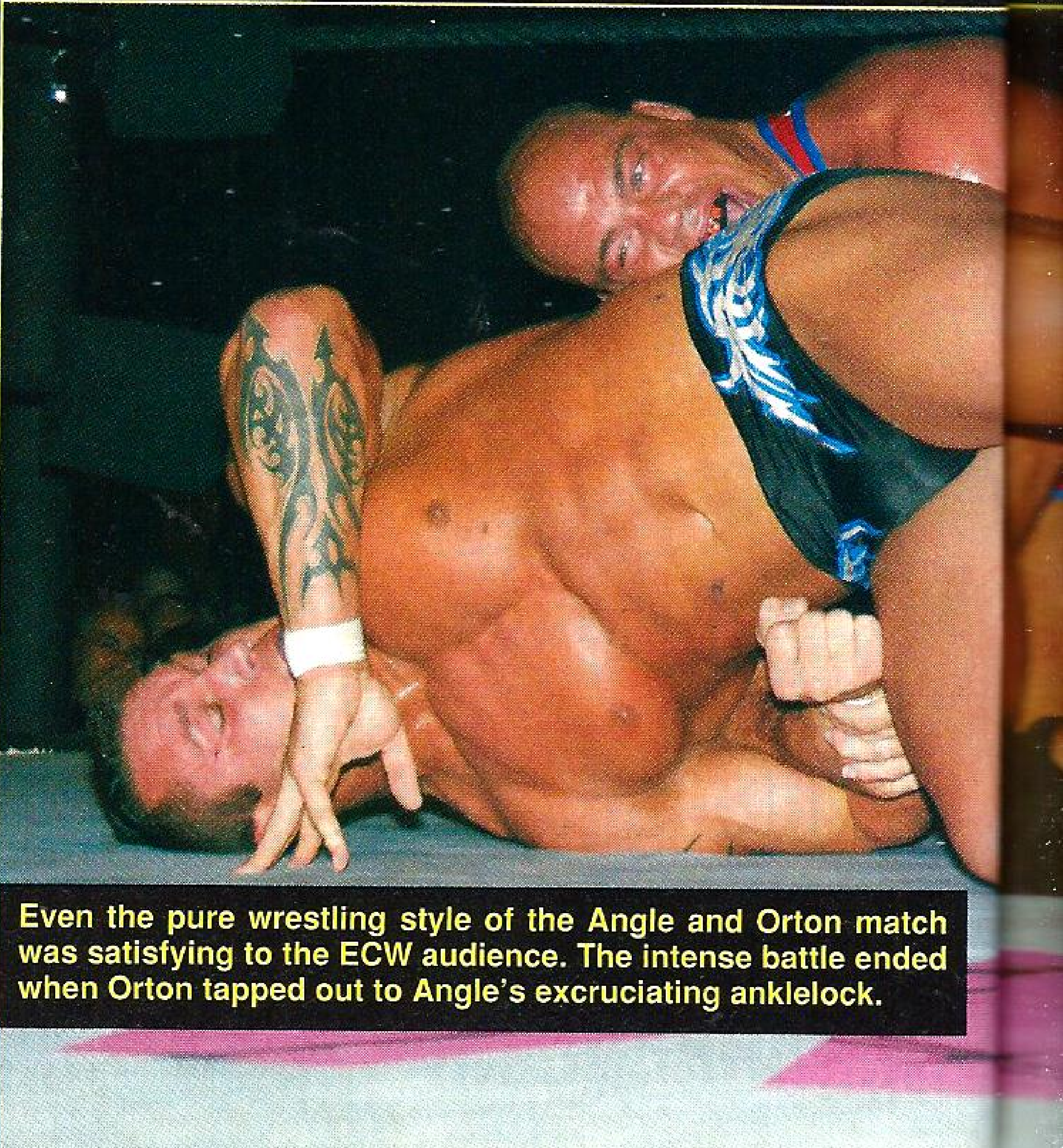
The 2005 One Night Stand pay-per-view might have given rise to the idea of reviving ECW—but it was the 2006 ONS that actually launched it. Taking a close analysis of this year's ONS will not only tell us how well the pay-per-view did, but it will also give us clues as to what the newly revived ECW is going to become. We'll take a look at the roster, the wrestling, and the future of the brand.

ECW, the little hardcore promotion that revolutionized the industry, is back—and here's where it's headed.

THE ROSTER

The lineup from the 2006 ONS pay-per-view wasn't as strong as the 2005 entry. Most of the reason for that is a number of wrestlers who participated in 2005 weren't available. The former Dudley Boyz—all three of them, Buh Buh Ray, D-Von, and Spike—are under contract to TNA and wrestling as Team 3-D. So is former ECW World champion Rhino. Chris Jericho is enjoying early retirement. Chris Benoit was letting his body heal. And Eddie Guerrero isn't with us anymore.

Yes, Mick Foley and Terry Funk both wrestled on the card, as did Yoshihiro Tajiri, Super Crazy, and Masato Tanaka. Unfortunately for ECW, Foley, Tajiri, Crazy, and Tanaka were brought in specifically for the pay-per-view and Funk, at age 61, can't be expected to wrestle on every ECW house show. WWE bolstered the roster by adding Kurt Angle and



Even the pure wrestling style of the Angle and Orton match was satisfying to the ECW audience. The intense battle ended when Orton tapped out to Angle's excruciating anklelock.

The Big Show, but even with those additions, the roster is still thin. Yes, ECW has its centerpieces in place (RVD, Angle, Sandman, Show, Sabu, and Tommy Dreamer), but what of the supporting cast?

We do have some clue. As the pay-per-view came to a close and the ECW locker room emptied out to celebrate with RVD, we saw some of the rumored additions to the roster: Justin Credible, Mikey Whipwreck, Danny Doring, Jason, and former TNA star Trinity all celebrated in the ring. Other rumored additions to the roster include Axl Rotten, C.W. Anderson, Francine, and Jazz.

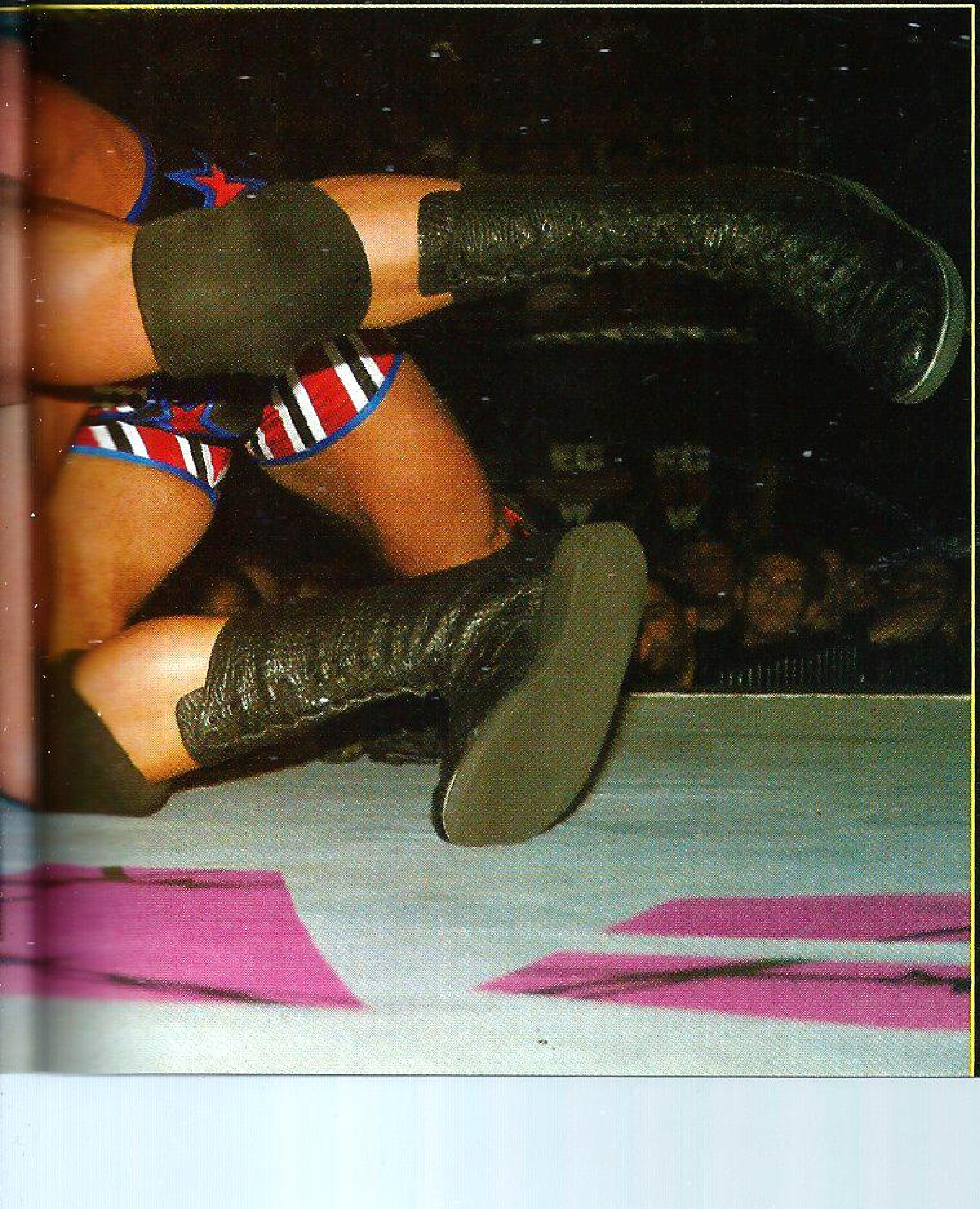
All of these names bring credibility to the relaunch. However, one worry comes to mind: It's been more than five years since most of the locker room has competed at a high level. Are they ready for the big time? Or are they going to have to battle through years of ring rust before their talent shines through once again?

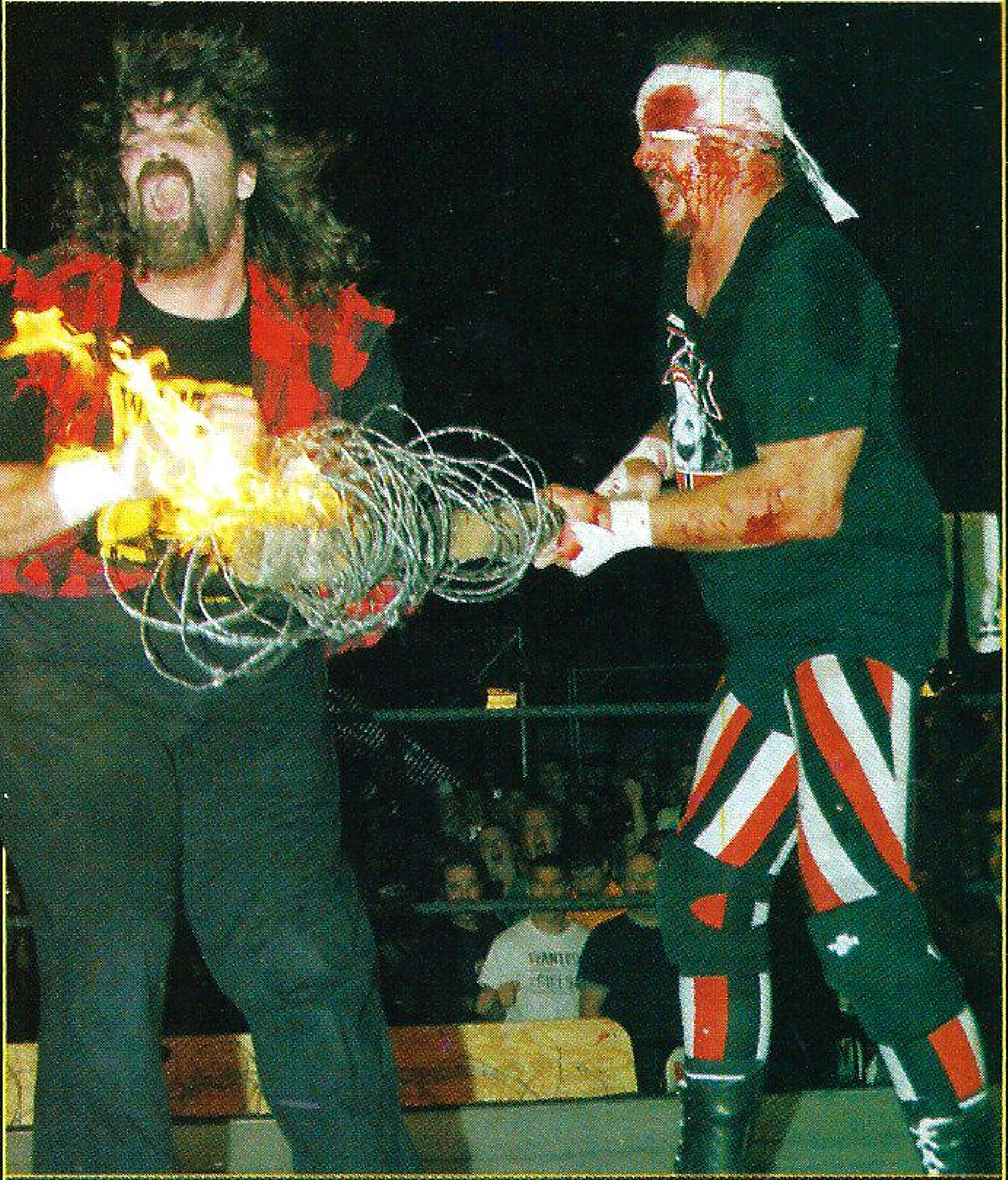
Only time will tell.

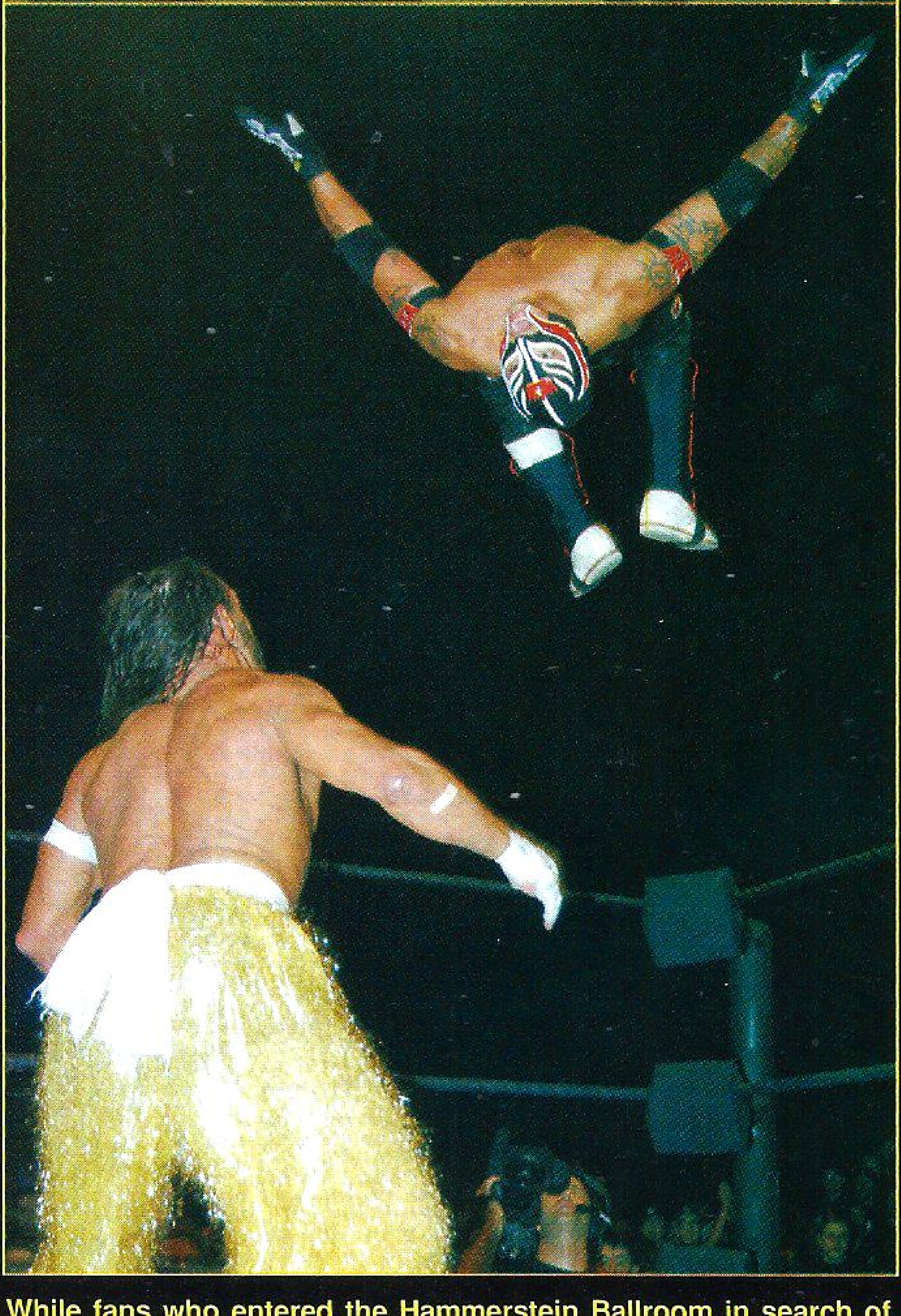
THE WRESTLING

At ONS, we saw an incredibly varied mix of wrestling styles. Angle and his WWE opponent, Randy Orton, wrestled the best pure match of the evening. There weren't an awful lot of high spots as both men concentrated on keeping his opponent grounded—so much so that it made even WWE's new style of wrestling seem fast-paced by comparison. And you know what? The fans ate it up. They enjoyed almost every minute of the match.

Then there was the Tajiri and Crazy vs. F.B.I. match. "Fast-paced" and "high-spot heaven" would be two appropriate adjectival phrases for it. It wasn't







While fans who entered the Hammerstein Ballroom in search of blood and gore found complete fulfillment during the Foley/Edge vs. Funk/Dreamer mêlée (top), Misterio vs. Sabu was deemed the hardcore match of the night, ending in a no contest due to both competitors collapsing from their efforts (above).

as crisp or precise as Angle and Orton's match, but the fans loved it and applauded the effort of all four men after it concluded.

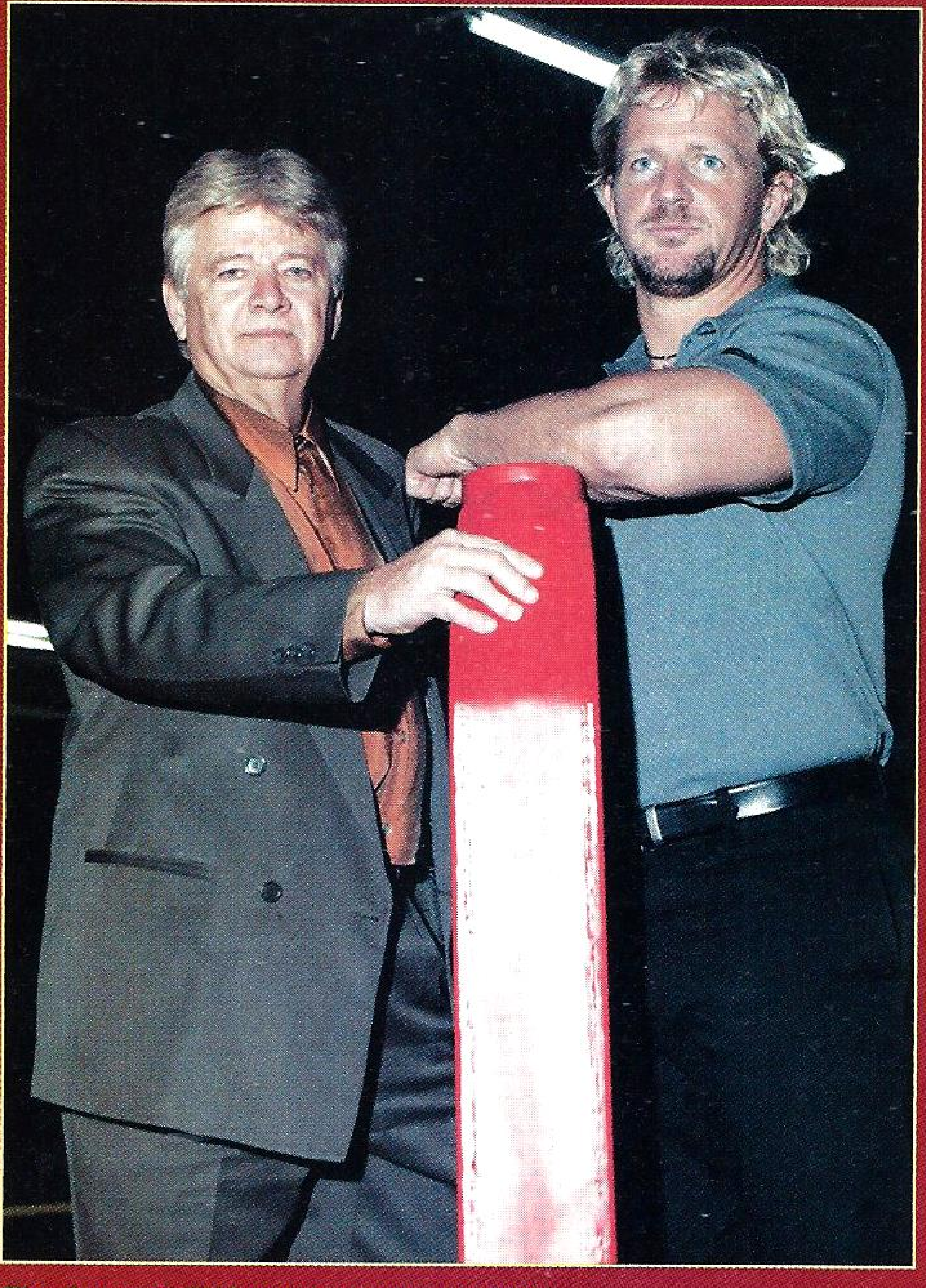
As for absolute, hardcore wrestling, no match could have been better than Rey Misterio Jr. defending the Smackdown World title against Sabu in a bout that ended with both men unable to continue. The challenger ended the contest by taking the champion head first through a table with a flying DDT—a very exciting contest without a decision.

RETURN ENGAGEMENTS

Launching a successful wrestling promotion in today's industry is difficult given the saturation of the market. There are well over a hundred wrestling promotions currently operating in the U.S. alone, and all of them have the same goals: to entertain the fans and turn a profit. That's how it's always been, and likely, how it always will be.

Successfully relaunching a promotion—well, that's nearly impossible.

Still, there have been some groups that—to some degree—triumphantly rose from the proverbial ashes and resumed operations. While none has yet to return to the glory days it once enjoyed, two of the bigger name promotions to return have been making strides in the right direction.



The Jarretts' TNA helped revive the NWA

At one point, Verne Gagne's American Wrestling Association was one of the premier promotions in America. In the mid-1980s the AWA secured a national television deal with ESPN. However, by 1991, the AWA had closed its doors and appeared to be simply a promotion with a storied past that ended up as a casualty of the growing juggernaut that was the WWF.

Around the same time, a virtual death knell was sounding for the NWA as well. The defection of WCW (which continued to claim the NWA's history despite breaking away) essentially killed off whatever remained of the organization that has formed in 1948. While the NWA wouldn't officially close up shop, it would go on to languish in relative obscurity through the 1990s with only a handful of promotions under its jurisdiction.

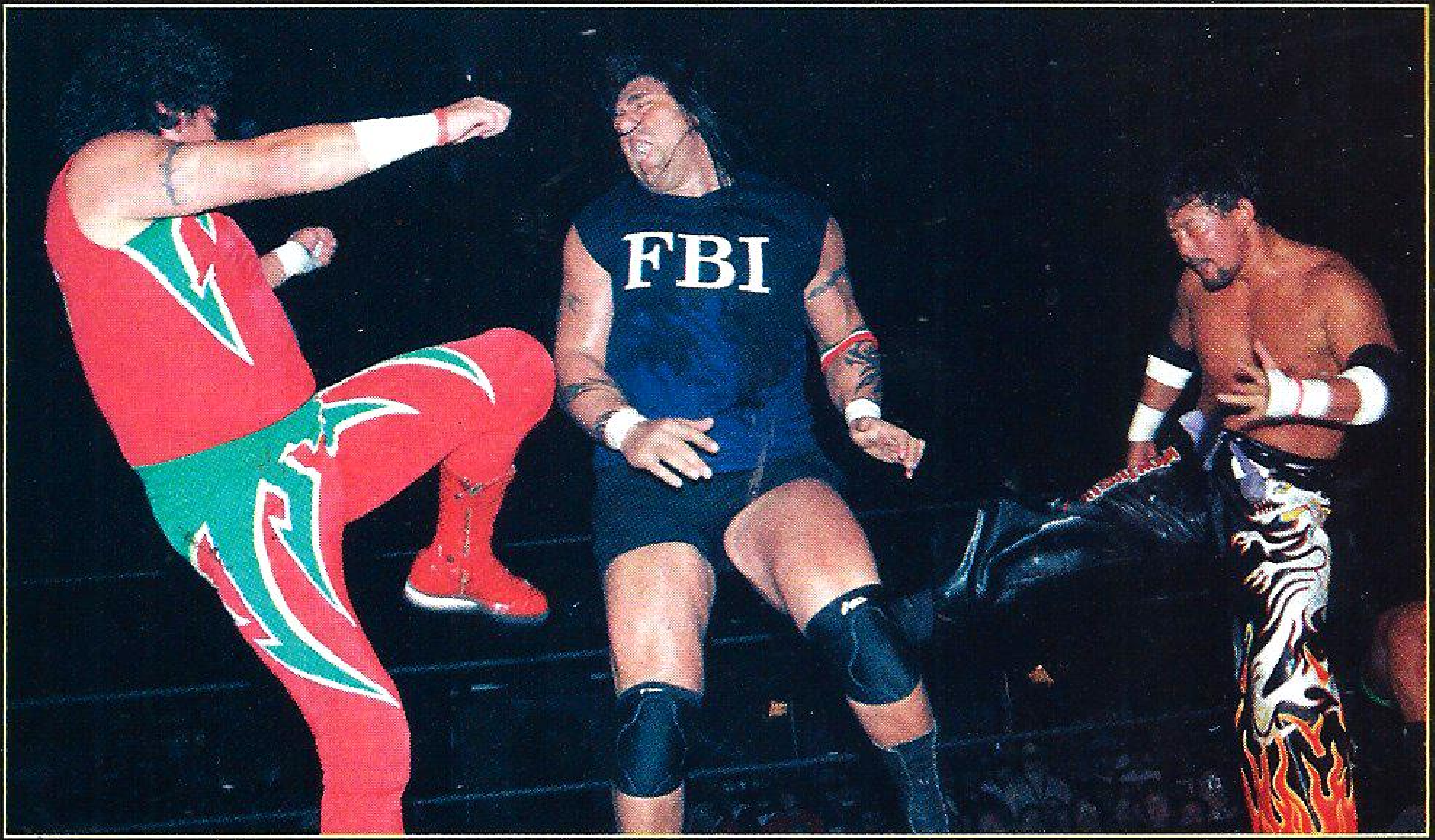
Today, however, both the AWA and NWA are going through a renaissance at the most unlikely of times. The NWA—or more specifically its World title—has been given new life thanks to television exposure on TNA. More and more independent promotions are now proudly operating under the NWA banner—with TNA being the clear leader.

Although it lacks the major television exposure of NWA, the AWA—now under the control of Dale Gagne—has enjoyed a modicum of success as well. The promotion returned to its roots and currently promotes shows primarily in the Midwest United States, although it has maintained a steady following worldwide. It did so by generating a groundswell of support from a loyal Midwest fan base, allowing the AWA the ability to modestly expand its operations, as well as put the promotion's name back in the minds of more mainstream fans.

While ECW has the obvious advantage of a television deal and the deep pockets of one Vince McMahon to fund its operations, the promotion would be wise to take notice of such revivals, and the struggles they went through to return to respectability once again. Financially, ECW will thrive as long as Vince McMahon wants to bankroll it, but reconnecting with the fans is a completely different issue.

—Frank Ingiosi

Of course, we'd be remiss if we didn't mention the Dreamer and Funk vs. Foley and Edge match. This was, simply put, an old-school gorefest. There was nothing even remotely pretty about the bout unless you appreciate the color of blood. It was ugly as hell, but darn it if it wasn't effective.



Although not necessarily a hardcore battle, Tajiri and Super Crazy fought F.B.I. in a match that triggered an enthusiastic reception from the horde of hardcore fans.

Then there was the main event: Rob Van Dam versus the ECW Antichrist, John Cena. In case you didn't notice, that match was as close to the WWE style that you could possibly get inside an ECW ring—and the fans ate it up. Thanks to his amazing athleticism—and a nice amount of outside help—RVD captured the first world title of his career and sent the Hammerstein Ballroom into bedlam.

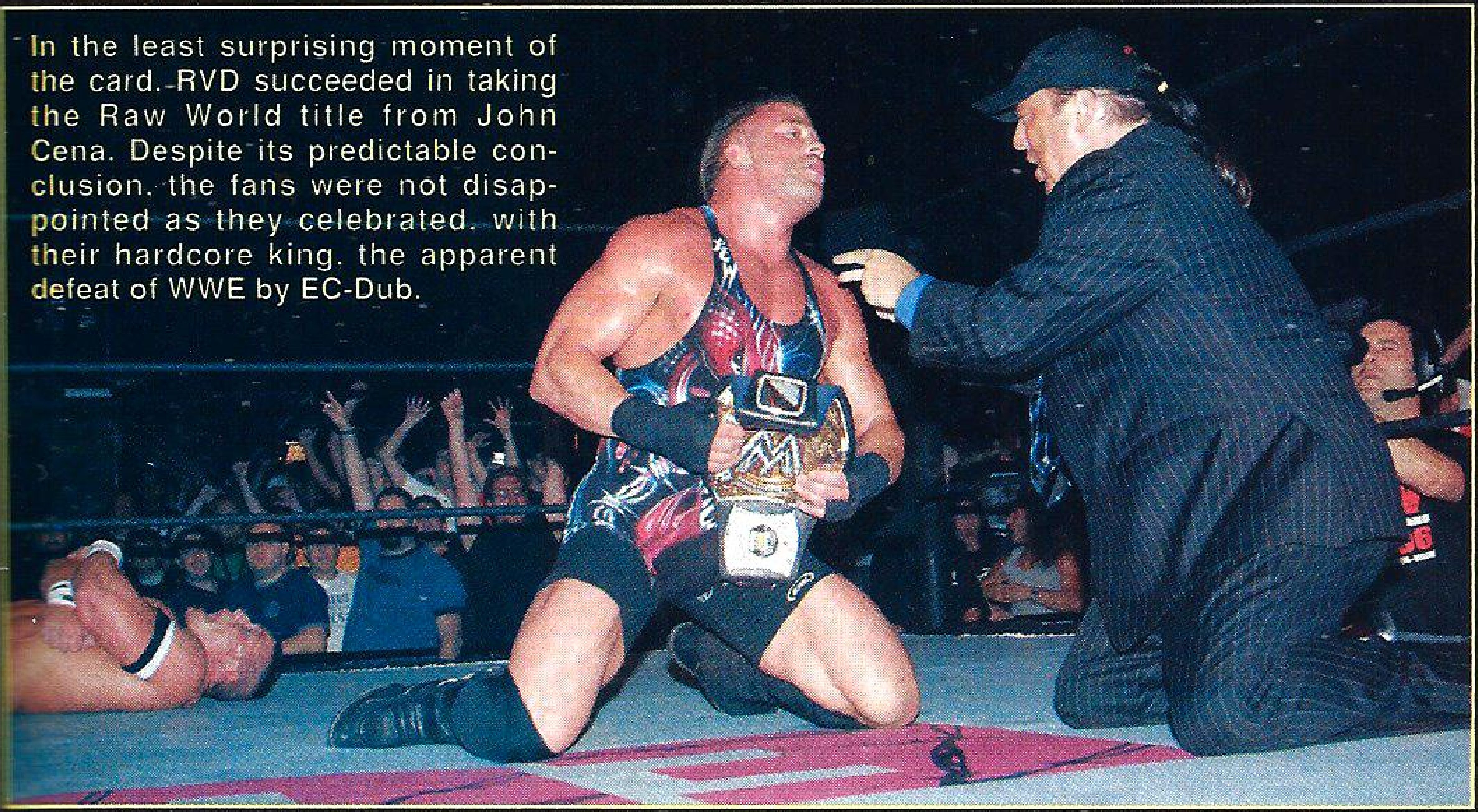
So, what does this tell us? It tells us that ECW will likely encompass many different divergent styles of wrestling until the fans dictate which style of wrestling they want to see more of. It will then be dependent upon ECW's roster to adjust to whatever style is chosen.

THE FUTURE

Does ECW have a future? You bet it does. Its roster and in-ring style might be a little unsettled, but ECW has two things going for it that it hasn't had before: An incredibly hungry fan base ready to devour anything ECW puts in front of it, and the financial support of none other than Vince McMahon.

Don't underestimate how important both of these are to the future of the brand. If ECW's fans are as faithful as they have appeared to be over the past year, they will mass for every house show and give instant credibility to ECW's TV show by driving up the ratings. The brand's fans are going to want this venture to succeed no matter what; if that means that they will have to put on blinders to forget that ECW is actually in the hands of the McMahon family, they'll do just that.

McMahon's support will also go a long way toward making ECW work. Not only will WWE's coffers allow ECW a slow start if it must, just the fact that Heyman won't be responsible for the financial end of the operation means that he'll be free to concentrate on booking and making the in-ring product as best as it can be. The importance of that cannot be understated.



In the least surprising moment of the card, RVD succeeded in taking the Raw World title from John Cena. Despite its predictable conclusion, the fans were not disappointed as they celebrated, with their hardcore king, the apparent defeat of WWE by EC-Dub.

Now, concern should exist in terms of McMahon getting overly involved. Hopefully, he'll let Heyman book the promotion as he would. He has already shown enough resolve to allow an ECW wrestler to hold the WWE championship. Believe us when we tell you that it's a bigger deal to him than any amount of zeros at the end of a check.

Yes, ECW should succeed. The only question now is: Will it? ☐

TNA

10 Wrestlers You Need To Know

Photos by Lee South/TNA Wrestling

Section Compiled by Dan Murphy

PERHAPS THE BEST way to gauge the overall health of a wrestling promotion is to take a good look at the depth of its talent roster.

The NWA World title picture is extremely crowded, with Jeff Jarrett, Abyss, Rhino, Raven, Sting, Ron Killings, Monty Brown, and Scott Steiner all vying for a crack at the strap that is secured around Christian Cage's waist. Samoa Joe has been a fighting X division champion, especially against former champions Christopher Daniels and A.J. Styles. And, America's Most Wanted has their hands full defending the NWA World tag team title against Daniels and Styles, The James Gang, Team Canada, and Team 3D.

Those champions and contenders receive a lot of attention and plenty of coveted airtime on *Impact*, but the TNA roster is even deeper than most people may realize. In fact, there are many stars on the rise that are just waiting for their opportunity to step up and take their spot as a major player in TNA.

In this special section, we take a look at "The 10 TNA Wrestlers You Need To Know." These are those wrestlers or teams that don't receive the attention—and sometimes the matches or TV time—that they deserve. These are wrestlers who have all of the skill and ability to contend for major championships in the coming weeks and months. Some of them, such as The Naturals and Matt Bentley, are former champions. Others, like Alex Shelley and A1, look to be "can't miss" future champions.

In the following profiles, we examine each wrestler's strengths and weaknesses and try to determine why they are in the position they are in today. We also try to predict what direction their career is headed and sometimes offer a little advice on what pitfalls to avoid.

Each profile includes a brief summary of the wrestler's current role within TNA, his personal ambition, and a quote that illustrates either his goals or his current stats in TNA. You may notice some glaring similarities between profiles—more than a few wrestlers blame TNA management for failing to give them an opportunity. Others have had their confidence shaken and are committed to getting back to their winning ways. Certainly, each person profiled has the pure ability to do just that.

We also tried to get some insight from people who know each wrestler best: Scott D'Amore, Simon Diamond, Bobby Heenan, Mike Tenay, and others. We hope these voices provide additional expert analysis into each wrestler profiled and add to your enjoyment of this section.

TNA has a wealth of talent on its roster, and that will make for some incredible matches in the weeks, months, and years ahead. We are confident that the wrestlers profiled on the pages that follow will be a major part of those matches and a major part of the future of TNA.

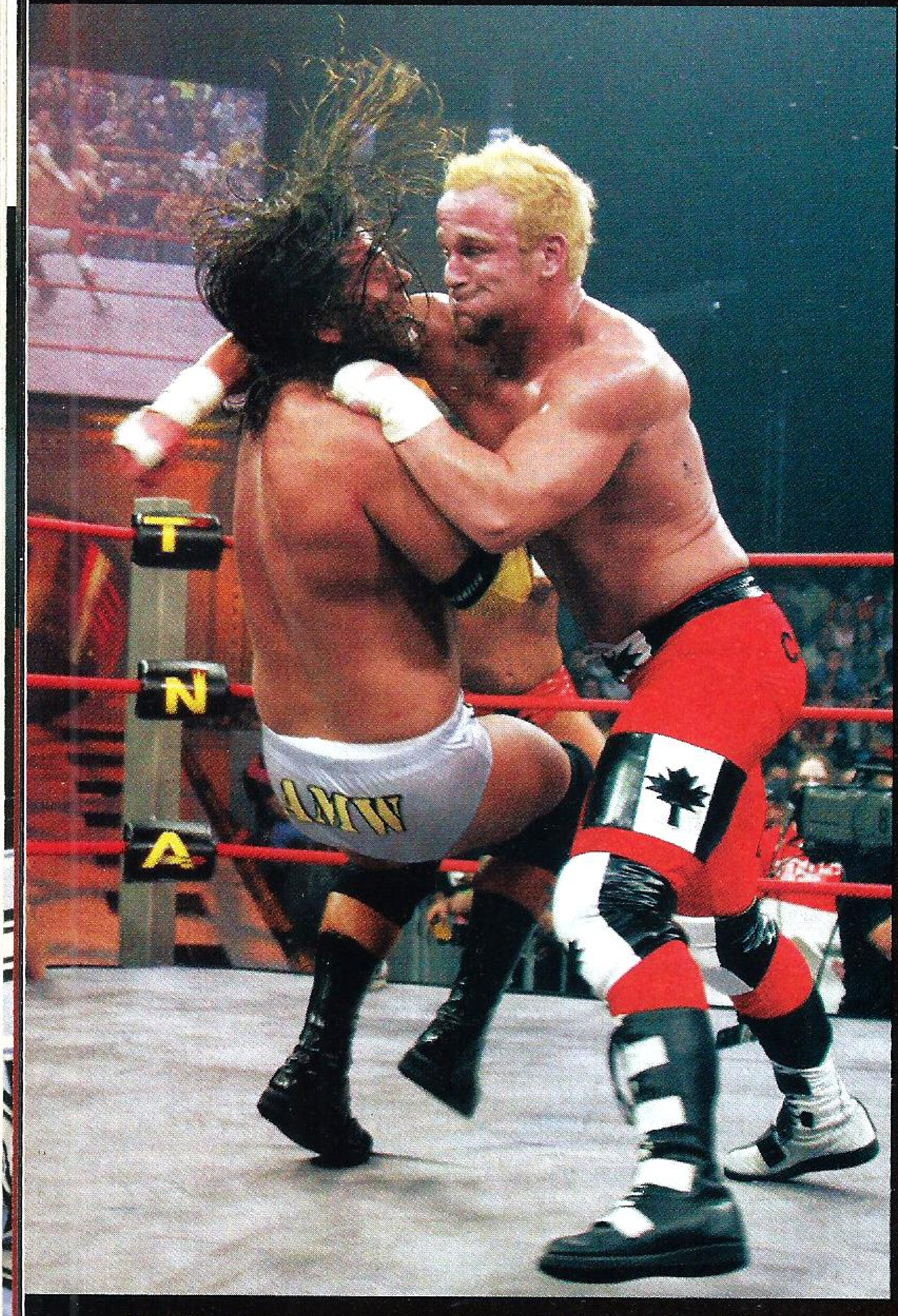
Eric Young

Current Role: Henchman for Team Canada

Ambition: To win the NWA World title and to successfully defend it in Toronto

What He Has To Say: "Coach D'Amore says I'm not half as dumb as I look."

Analysis: It's easy to write off Eric Young as the bumbling comic relief to the ever-serious Team Canada, but that's doing a huge disservice to the man who has earned the nickname "Showtime."



Eric Young may have everyone fooled with his less-than-brilliant persona in TNA, but followers of "Showtime's" career know better. Young (taking out former foe James Storm) has a wealth of wrestling experience that is going largely unnoticed due to his position within Team Canada.

Young broke into wrestling back in 1998, and, for the next eight years, he established himself as one of Ontario's premier independent wrestlers. He even owned and operated his own wrestling school, Wrestleplex, in Toronto.

"'Showtime' is a solid all-around wrestler," said Ontario independent wrestler J.T. Playa, a man who has faced Young many times through the years. "'Showtime' can outwrestle you, he can overpower you, he can out-fight you. He can beat you any one of a dozen ways, and, let me tell you, he's a heck of a lot smarter than most of those guys in TNA think he is."

Young certainly seemed to be the smartest member of Jeff Jarrett's Army this spring. When Jarrett and the rest of his cronies were celebrating Sting's retirement from TNA, it was Young who insisted that Sting would be back and that Jarrett would be facing a reckoning day. While Jarrett and Scott D'Amore gloated, Young was checking the rafters and looking under the ring, positive that Sting would return.

As it turned out, "Showtime" had everything figured out. Unfortunately for them, Jarrett, D'Amore, and the rest of the crew weren't paying attention.

There's a good chance D'Amore still isn't paying attention to Young. While D'Amore is busy grooming Bobby Roode for singles contention, and Petey Williams, Johnny Devine, and A1 are jockeying for a position within Team Canada, Young seems to be the odd man out. Young could excel in the X division, but D'Amore seems intent to keep Williams as his X division thoroughbred. Young could contend for the NWA World title, but D'Amore seems reluctant to let any of his men come between Jarrett and the title he is chasing, so D'Amore is reigning his men in. It's only a matter of time before something gives.

"Eric is too good to go without a championship for too long," Playa said. "He's just biding his time and waiting for his opening, and when he gets it, he's going to be wearing somebody's title belt."

Young has the perfect blend of physical strength, technical know-how, and—believe it or not—aerial ability. Young has shown in the past that he's willing to come off the top rope and sacrifice his own body to win a match. Young may also be one of TNA's best-conditioned athletes, as he has wrestled countless 60-minute matches on the independent circuit and finished just as fresh as he was when the bell first rang.

"Showtime" is too talented—if unassuming—to be taken lightly. Especially by D'Amore and his Team Canada comrades.

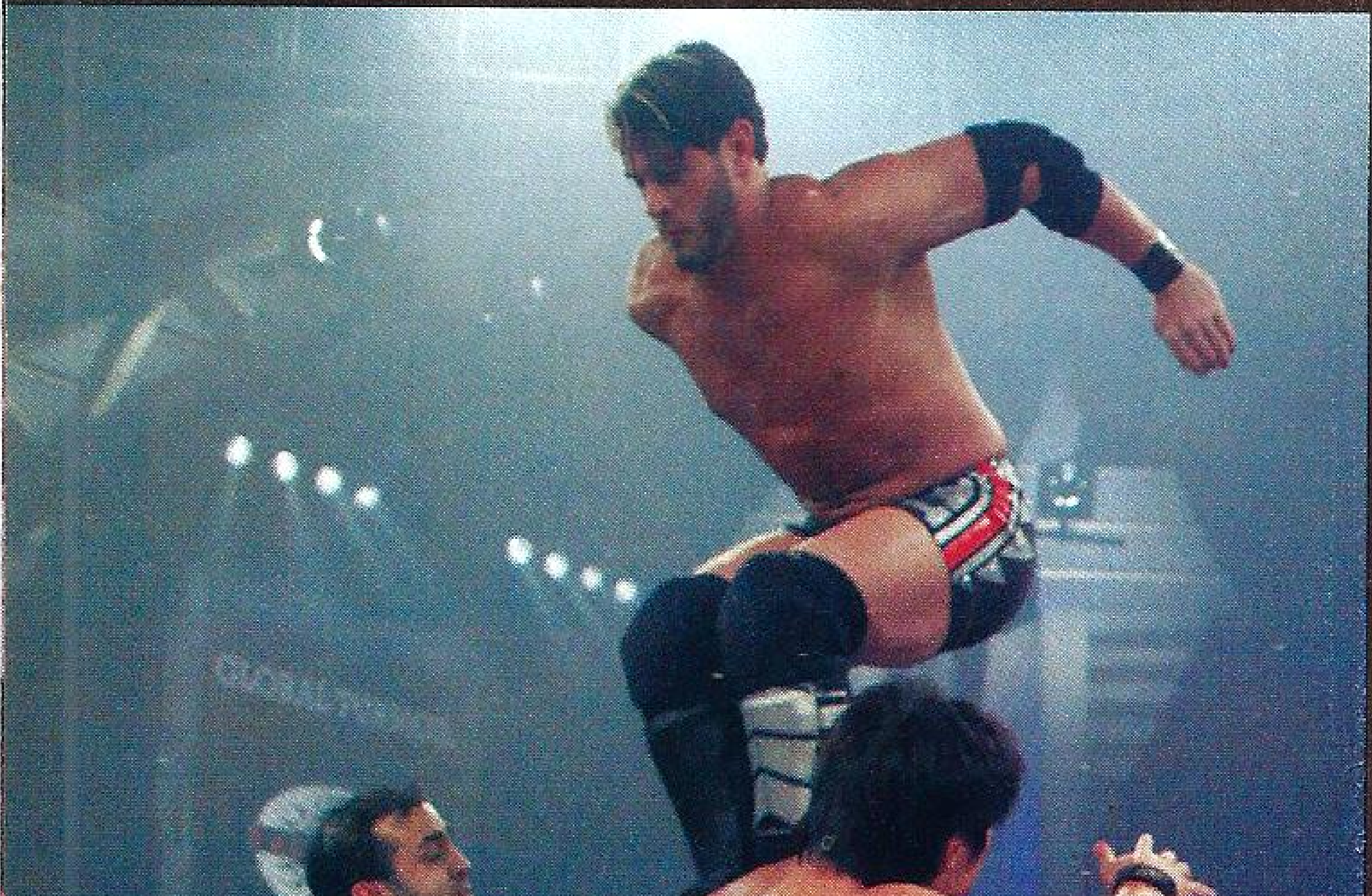
Eric Young

Alex Shelley

Current Role: TNA's resident video voyeur and trouble-stirrer

Ambition: To become wrestling's biggest multimedia crossover star, holding the NWA World heavyweight title and making Paparazzi Productions a major video distributor

What He Has To Say: "I don't get why all these X division guys are so ticked at me. It's like I was telling Big Kevin the other day. It's not that a mediocre big man can beat a great little man, it's just that—other than me—there's not a lot of *great* X division guys around here. I'm just speaking the truth. Why do they want to kill the messenger?"



Alex Shelley (coming down hard on Minoru Tanaka's arm) is a troublemaker by design. Every allegiance he forges and rule he breaks has a purpose behind it. By aligning himself with Kevin Nash and his one-man war against the X division, Shelley has ensured he will be spared the wrath of "Big Sexy"—at least for now.

Analysis: On the Boston Bruins teams of the 1980s, no one got under the opposing team's skin quite like Kenny Linseman. Known by friends and foes alike as "The Rat," Linseman was always chattering at opponents and sneaking cheap shots all in an effort to draw penalties when frustrated opponents eventually retaliated.

He was the kind of player hockey fans absolutely despise ... unless he happens to be wearing your team's sweater.

Alex Shelley clearly relishes his role as being TNA's version of "The Rat." He first attracted attention while teaming with Roderick Strong and Austin Aries and filming the tandem's matches with his ubiquitous video camera. Scott D'Amore and Jeff Jarrett then hired him to collect incriminating video of Miss Jackie, and then to get stealth footage of Sting to "prove" Sting had turned tail and run from TNA.

Despite his rulebreaking ways, Shelley earned a spot on Team USA. And, although he could barely get along with his teammates, Shelley, Sonjay Dutt, Chris Sabin, and Jay Lethal won the tournament. But before anyone could give him kudos for that achievement, he was cozying up to Kevin Nash as "Big Sexy" ripped on the X division—the very group that made Shelley a star in TNA.

Shelley sticks a knife in the back of his teammates; he sells his paparazzi services to the highest bidder; he insults people casually and without provocation; he frustrates and infuriates most of his opponents long before the opening bell sounds; and then he exploits his over-anxious opponent's mistakes and manages to win the match. In short, Shelley is the perfect rat.

He's also in near-perfect position within the X division. The reigning champion, Samoa Joe, seems to be on a path that's going to put him in contention for the NWA World title. Assuming that Joe abandons the division (and that's a big assumption), Shelley seems to be the heir apparent (although Chris Sabin may disagree), especially with Nash at his side.

The biggest challenge Shelley will have to overcome—other than Samoa Joe—will be Senshi. The former Low-Ki has looked tremendous since returning to TNA. If Senshi is in TNA for the long haul—and doesn't disappear in two or three months for an extended tour of Japan or elsewhere—he will certainly take issue with Shelley, and that's a good thing. A Shelley-Senshi feud could be an X division classic.

Alex Shelley

A1

Current Role: Team Canada's breakout star in training

Ambition: Fulfill Coach Scott D'Amore's expectations by winning the NWA World title and replacing Petey Williams as captain of Team Canada

What He Has To Say: "I don't back down from any man, and when Coach D'Amore says it's time for me to win the NWA World title, no one is going to stand in my way."

Analysis: Scott D'Amore has spent the past four years grooming A1 for superstardom. The Dunnville, Ontario, native is a former Border City Wrestling heavyweight champion and is one of D'Amore's prize students—and for good reason. At 6'0" and a chiseled 245 pounds, A1 has been blessed with a natural size that is the envy of his Team Canada teammates. Some have compared his look to that of a young Triple-H. And, like Triple-H, D'Amore is convinced that many heavyweight championships are in A1's future.

Bobby Roode may disagree.

It's hard to get anyone in Team Canada to say anything negative about one of their teammates (except for Eric Young—everyone seems to enjoy picking on him). Roode, in particular, is notoriously quiet with the press. When he speaks, he contemplates each word before speaking, and usually answers with one- or two-word responses.

When we asked him if he thought A1 was Team Canada's next singles star, Roode's answer was telling.

"He's got potential," Roode said, his eyes radiating intensity. When pressed and asked if A1 had more potential than anyone else in Team Canada, Roode looked like he was ready to jump out of his skin, but he kept his voice steady and calm.

"I wouldn't say that," he replied.

Scott D'Amore calls Roode "The Canadian Enforcer." The enforcer tag is both a hockey term and a reference to Arn Anderson, the man who served as something of a glorified bodyguard for The Four Horsemen. It's a respectable position—in fact, Anderson was really the glue that held the Horsemen together—but it takes a special sort of man to excel in the position of enforcer. You have to surrender your individual career goals for the good of the team. You have to stand down and let the star of the group get the glory, knowing deep down that said star would never have been so successful without your help.

D'Amore has A1 picked as his NWA World title contender. He is slowly grooming A1 for that top spot, concentrating on handpicking the opponents that can best help A1 develop, like a boxing manager does to help his man crack the top 10 rankings.

A1 is good—he's tough, he's powerful, and he's a very quick learner. But he's not ready for superstardom yet. Meanwhile, Roode has been climbing the singles rankings himself, courtesy of some wins over Rhino and others. It's not a stretch to expect NWA World title shots for Roode very soon, and the enforcer may not be willing to take one for the team and bide his time to match D'Amore's timeline for A1.

There's going to be a heavyweight power struggle at the core of Team Canada in the very near future—one that may or may not play itself out in front of the public. But it will be the biggest challenge of A1's career to date. He doesn't have to worry about proving himself to the fans quite yet. He just has to prove himself to his own teammates.

A1 may appear to be the strong, silent type on *Impact*, but Team Canada's star pupil packs quite the punch—as A.J. Styles can attest. The massive A1—under the tutelage of Scott D'Amore—is appearing more likely to be one of the top big men in TNA in the near future.

David Young

Current Role: The strong, but silent member of The Diamonds in the Rough

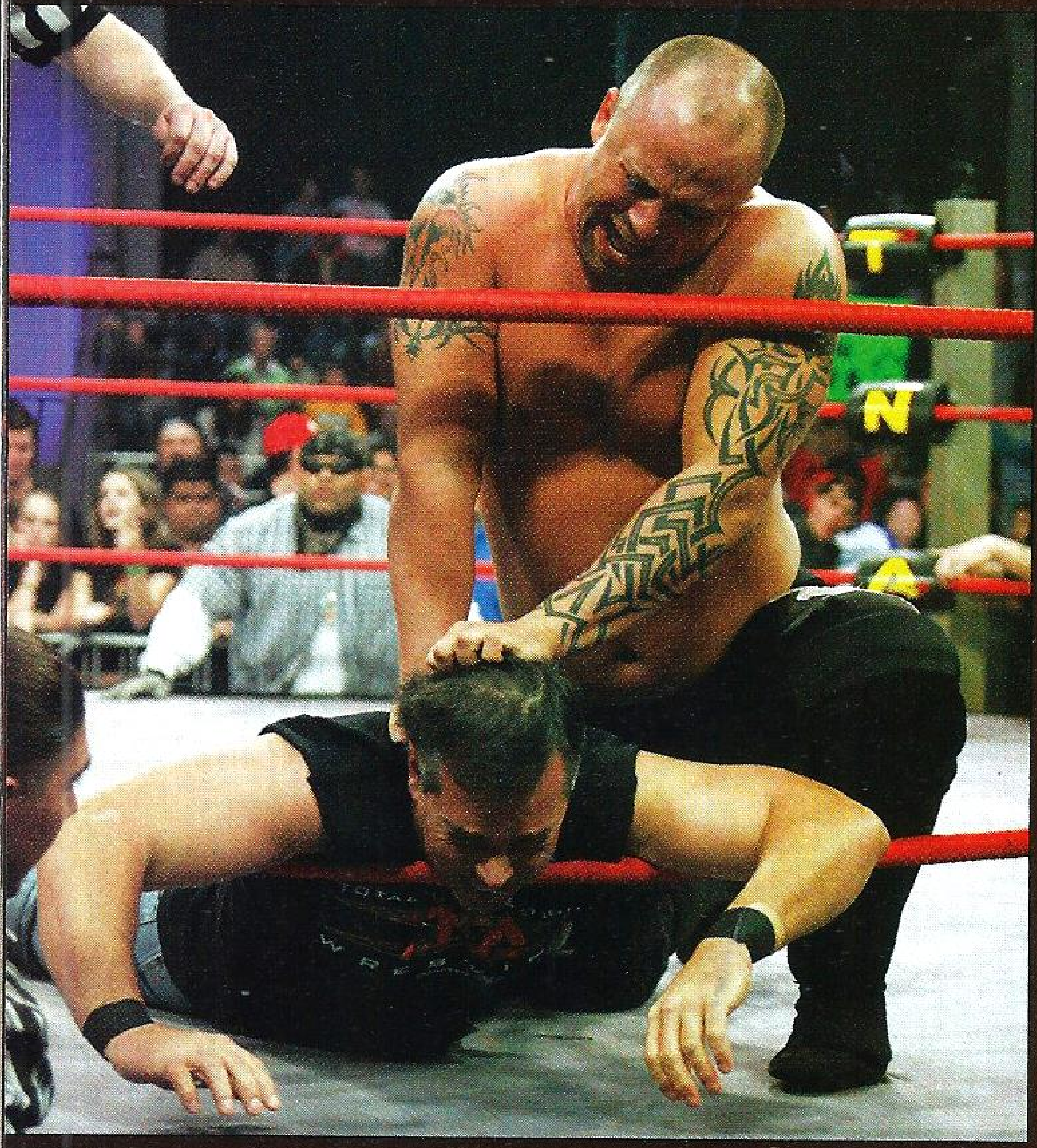
Ambition: To win back the respect of the fans and his peers

What He Has To Say: "I hear people saying our win over A.J. Styles and Christopher Daniels on *Impact* was a fluke. That's absolute garbage! The Diamonds in the Rough are one of the top tag teams anywhere, and anyone who says differently is full of crap."

Analysis: David Young still can't get respect.

The former NWA Wildside heavyweight champion has won more than a half-dozen regional championships on the independent circuit, including several tag team titles over the course of his 17-year career. He has been competing in TNA since 2002, and his devastating spinebuster has helped earn him wins over the likes of Ron Killings and A.J. Styles.

But wins have become a rare commodity for Young, who currently partners with Elix Skipper as part of The Diamonds in the Rough. In fact, the most memorable part of Young's tenure with TNA was his almost Goldbergian streak—except it was a losing streak.



David Young's monumental losing streak took some of the luster off of an otherwise outstanding professional career. Breaking his streak nearly two years ago, Young continues to struggle in singles competition—such as dominating and losing to NASCAR driver Jeff Hammond (pictured)—despite having all the necessary tools for success.

It all started back when Young joined Glen Gilberti's Sports Entertainment Extreme faction. Gilberti and Young began tagging regularly, but, after suffering several loses, the former Disco Inferno bailed out on Young.

Announcers Mike Tenay and Don West pointed out Young's TNA losing streak week after week. He did anything he could to try to break the streak with that one elusive win, but everything seemed to backfire. He tried to jump a group of lucha minis, but ended up on his back as a result. He even lost a match to referee Mike Posey, thanks to Gilberti's interference. By the time he finally beat Gilberti to stop the skid, his streak was at 0-93, according to Tenay. But that doesn't mean Young is a loser.

"As far as I'm concerned, David Young is the single most underrated competitor here in TNA," Tenay said. "Few people can match his blend of brawling abilities and his scientific know-how. He's definitely a guy I'd want to have on my side in a bar fight, and anyone who steps into the ring against him thinking they're in for an easy night is going to be in for one heck of a surprise."

"The thing with slumps is that they get inside your head," Tenay continued. "Young wasn't wrestling to win—he was wrestling not to lose. And when that happens, you're bound to make mistakes."

Young may have recovered from that slump, but he still hasn't quite bounced back in the eyes of many observers. The Diamonds in the Rough are struggling in the mid-card, and—almost two years after that horrendous slump came to an end—Young hasn't beaten anyone of consequence in a major match in TNA. Some people are beginning to wonder if Young has ever mentally recovered from the humiliation of being known for having one of the longest losing streaks in wrestling history.

"David is fine, Elix is fine, I'm fine, and I'm pretty sure The Diamonds in the Rough will be your tag team champions," a perturbed Simon Diamond said when asked for his assessment on Young. "The so-called slump is ancient history. Besides, it doesn't take into account all of his wins in Georgia and the rest of the independent circuit. It's a media myth, and you should be ashamed of doing so much to perpetuate it."

But the person truly perpetuating the perception of Young struggling is Young himself. And it's about time for him to exorcise those demons with some big wins.

David Young

Sonjay Dutt

Current Role: None in particular following the World X Cup

Ambition: To follow in the footsteps of Chris Sabin and Jerry Lynn and be named captain of Team USA in the next World X Cup tournament

What He Has To Say: "Being part of Team USA and having the opportunity to represent the U.S. against such an incredible assortment of international talent was the greatest experience I've had in wrestling."

Analysis: Sonjay Dutt is on the verge of the biggest opportunity—and biggest challenge—of his career. And that challenge stands 16 inches taller than him and outweighs him by 145 pounds.

Qualifying for Team USA was a major accomplishment for Dutt, and it elevated him to the highest-profile status he had ever enjoyed in TNA up to that point. Dutt was a solid piece of Team USA, a role player who embodied the World X Cup ideals of sportsmanship, athleticism, and innovation. When TNA won that tournament against some of the top international talent in the sport, it was a major boost of confidence for the man who calls himself "The Original Playa from the Himalaya."

Despite being a key member of Team USA during the World X Cup, Sonjay Dutt may still be one of the best-kept secrets in TNA's X division. His ring prowess and ability (here, leveling Petey Williams) have made him a valuable commodity to TNA, yet he is often overshadowed by high-profile names such as Jay Lethal.

But Dutt realized that the X division is very crowded at the moment, and Samoa Joe is more preoccupied with competing against Jeff Jarrett and Scott Steiner than facing traditional X division competition. Rather than waste his World X Cup momentum by facing other X division contenders (a loss to any of whom could drop Dutt further from title contention), Dutt has decided to defend the division's honor against its biggest critic—Kevin Nash.

"I've had to deal with guys like that my entire life," Dutt said. "People who said I was too small to ever become a professional wrestler. Guys who said I was too small to make an impact in a promotion like TNA. I've spent years working my tail off, getting in shape, and learning how to wrestle and how to fight, and so has everyone else in this X division. When a bully like Nash walks in and badmouths us simply because we don't have his genetics, I take that as a very personal insult. And either myself or Chris Sabin will be the man who finally shuts Nash's mouth."

Sabin got the first chance to silence Nash at Slammiversary, but Nash is determined to see his one-man Crusade against the X division through until the bitter end. Dutt is gearing himself up, mentally and physically, for the challenge the former WWF and WCW World champion presents.

"I'm doing more work with weights, but I know I'm not going to be able to out-muscle Nash," Dutt confided. "I'm mostly concentrating on my lateral movement and my cardio conditioning, and I'm building myself up because I'm sure I'll take a lot of punishment if he gets a good grip on me."

Dutt has also been studying tapes of Nash's matches and looking for openings to attack's Nash's suspect knees. He also wants to make Nash work and have the match go at least 16 minutes. The longer the match, the more it benefits Dutt. After all, Nash has wrestled a part-time schedule (at best) for the past five years and has had heart trouble that prevents him from exerting himself over an extended period of time.

If Dutt is successful in finding ways to avoid a larger opponent's grasp, take him off his feet, and test his conditioning, he may not only beat Nash, but he may also discover the way to beat Samoa Joe. Who better to serve as X division champion than someone who defended that division's reputation against its most vocal critic?

Sonjay Dutt

The Naturals

Current Role: Three-time former NWA World tag team champions struggling through a prolonged slump

Ambition: To score a convincing title victory over America's Most Wanted and stake their claim to being one of TNA's elite teams

What They Have To Say: "We know we have what it takes to regain the NWA World tag title. All we want is a fair chance."

—Andy Douglas

Analysis: The past four months have not been kind to Andy Douglas and Chase Stevens, collectively known as The Naturals. First, Scott Steiner injured Douglas, leaving Stevens to fend for himself as a singles competitor. Stevens suffered brutal beatings at the hands of Samoa Joe, Scott Steiner, Abyss, and others.

For several weeks, Shane Douglas appeared on the entrance ramp and watched. When Douglas returned, the Naturals continued to pile up losses, prompting Douglas to finally make his intentions clear.

"These kids have got a lot of heart and a lot of talent. They can achieve so much more with a mentor such as myself guiding them," Douglas said.

There may be some truth to Douglas' assessment. Stevens and Douglas won their first NWA tag team title under the management of the late Chris Candido, a former Triple Threat partner of Douglas in ECW. The Naturals found inspiration in Candido, and dedicated themselves to honoring his memory following his untimely passing. But The Naturals seemed to run out of gas in early 2006. Today, they have dropped out of contention for the tag title, falling below teams like Team 3-D, Team Canada, The James Gang, A.J. Styles & Christopher Daniels, and The Diamonds in the Rough.

Douglas is convinced that The Naturals' best days are still ahead of them.

"Chase and Andy are good kids. They're just too humble—too nice," Douglas said. "In this business, every once in a while you've got to be willing to make waves, to speak up and make demands. Otherwise, the guys who make the most noise get the most attention."

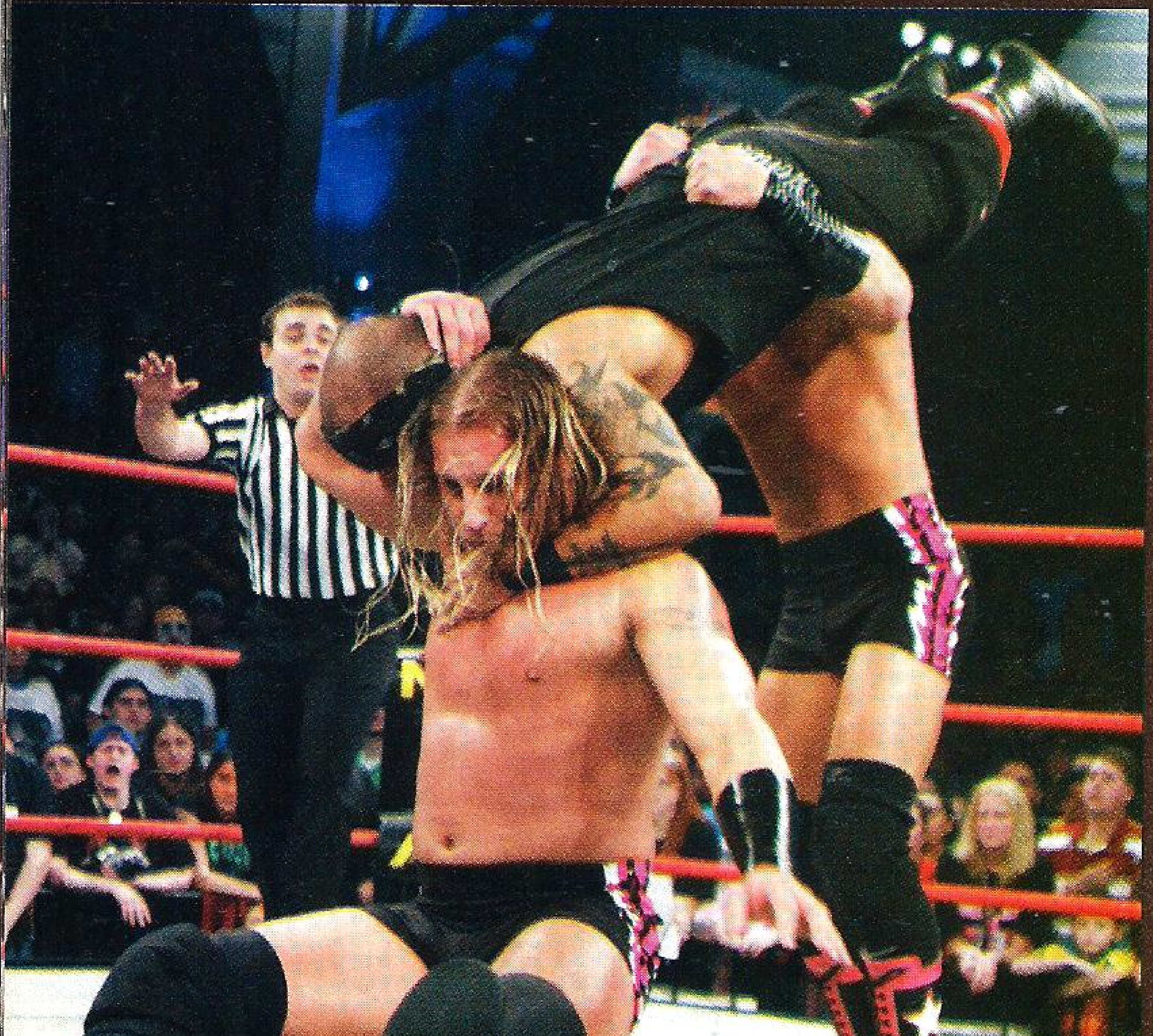
With Douglas in their corner, The Naturals certainly don't have to worry about being overlooked, as "The Franchise" is one of the best talkers in wrestling history.

TNA's tag team division is probably the best in the sport, and Douglas and Stevens have their work cut out for them to try to be competitive on a consistent basis. But The Naturals say they are ready for the challenge.

"We've kind of done everything backward," Douglas said. "When we won the belts, people thought it was a fluke—that we didn't really deserve to be champions. Even with the belts, it took us a long time before people were willing to take us seriously. By the time we lost the belts, we were wrestling better than ever. We're a better team today than we were when we were champions."

"We've been at the top of the card, and we've been at the bottom of the card, and we like being on top a heck of a lot better," Stevens said.

If there's such a thing as a good side to going through a prolonged slump, it's that things *have* to get better. With Douglas and Stevens focused on the belts and Shane Douglas at the helm, it would be foolish to bet against them.



The Naturals had lost their way as a tag team after experiencing great success early in their TNA career. The team, under Shane Douglas, must take on a new attitude and renewed focus if it intends to compete in a very deep TNA tag division. All indications are that they will do just that.

The Naturals

Matt Bentley

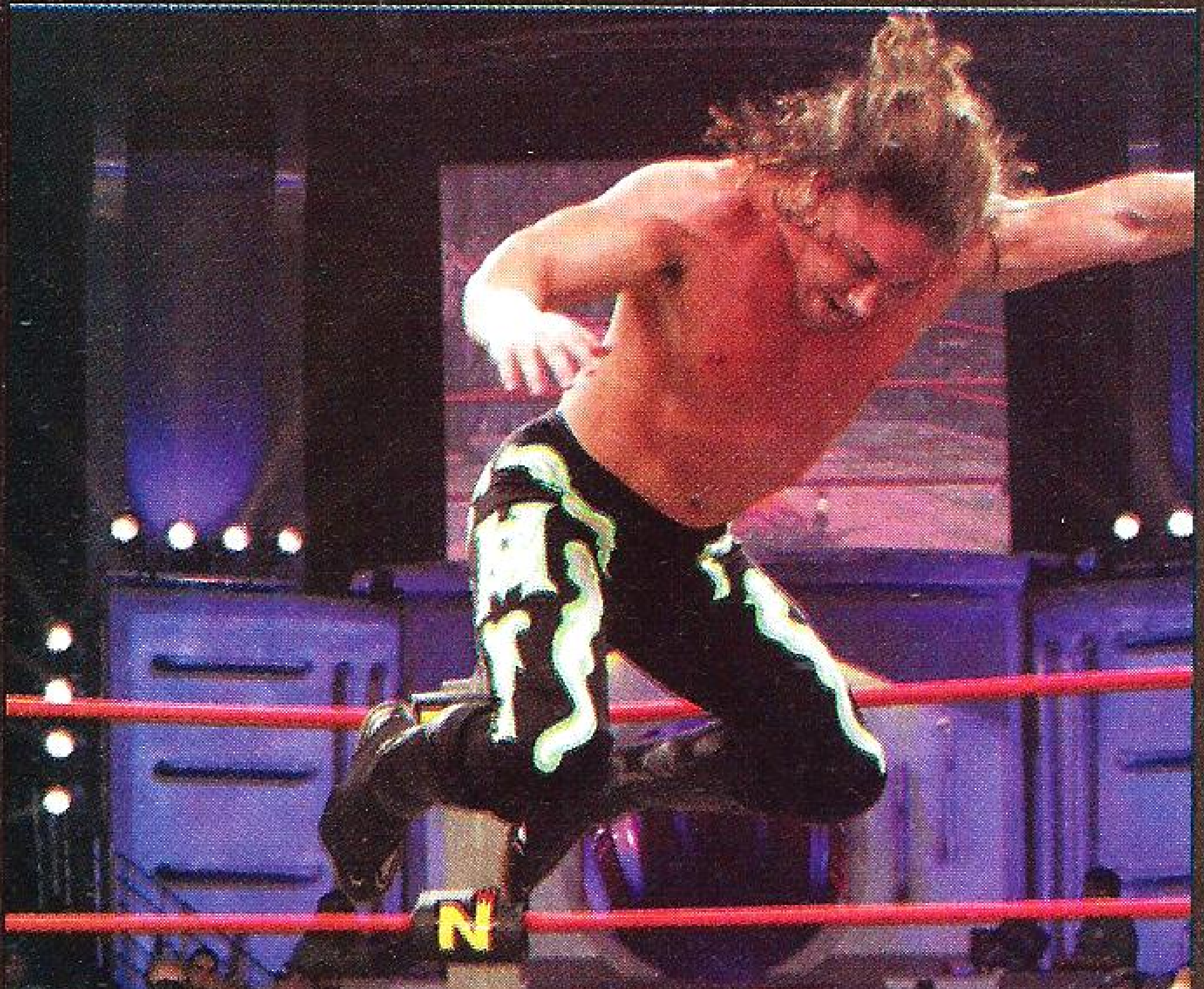
Current Role: Always arrogant perpetual contender to the X division title

Ambition: To establish himself as "The Showstopper" of TNA

What He Has To Say: "Call me Michael Shane, call me Matt Bentley, or call me whatever you want. The important thing is you call me the greatest wrestler ever to hold that X division championship."

Analysis: March 18, 2006. That was the last time Matt Bentley appeared on *Impact*.

That night, Bentley wrestled against Sonjay Dutt and Elix Skipper in a three-way match to qualify for Team USA in the World X Cup tournament. Dutt went on to win that match and proudly represented the U.S. in the tournament. Skipper went back to being part of the Diamonds in the Rough.


By any name, Matt Bentley (landing a huge kneedrop on James Storm) has had a very successful career to date, yet the former X champion has fallen on hard times as of late in TNA. The talented grappler is struggling to be noticed in a promotion filled with excellent young talent.

Bentley took his ball and went home.

Bentley hasn't been seen in TNA since—at least, he hasn't been seen at TNA's home base of The Impact Zone in Universal Studios in Orlando. But Bentley—and his beautiful valet, Traci Brooks—hasn't vanished. He's simply biding his time.

Throughout the spring and early summer, Bentley has been competing on the joint TNA/UWF house shows promoted by Hermie Sadler in Tennessee. He has faced a wide variety of competition away from the glare of the TV cameras. Bentley faced Dutt, former X division champion Petey Williams, Team 3D, and others. He has teamed with Traci several times in mixed tag matches as well. Bentley has lost more of these matches than he has won—and that's fine with Bentley.

Bentley is using those "dark matches" to scout future opponents. He's trying out new moves and experimenting. Because the matches aren't televised or officially recognized by TNA, losses don't hurt Bentley's standings in the rankings. He has nothing to lose.

It's a good strategy for the former X division champion, a man who had been in a severe slump prior to taking a sabbatical from *Impact*. A loss to Lance Hoyt at Destination X dropped him out of the title contention, and the loss to Dutt in the World X Cup qualifier rubbed salt in that wound.

Bentley takes enormous pride in being one of the kingpins of the X division and the self-professed greatest X division champion ever. By taking himself off TV, he's determined to break out of his slump and return to *Impact* with renewed confidence.

As far as Traci is concerned, Bentley's plan is working to perfection.

"I take issue with you saying Matt is in a slump. Everything 'Maverick' Matt does is for a purpose," Traci said. "He's deep in training to make his triumphant return to the X division and to take out that overrated Samoan marshmallow, Samoa Joe. Believe me, Matt will have that X division title back in the very near future."

Certainly, with Bentley's credentials, it would be foolish to bet against him. The two-time X division champion is the nephew of the legendary Shawn Michaels and graduated from Michaels' Texas Wrestling Academy. He briefly competed for the WWF, WCW, and ECW, and had successful tours in Japan and in Ring of Honor. He won the first-ever Ultimate X match and was christened the new "franchise of TNA" by Shane Douglas.

Bentley is a perfectionist, and he's perfecting his game. The X division should officially be on notice.

Matt Bentley

Elix Skipper

Current Role: High-flying member of The Diamonds in the Rough alongside David Young and Simon Diamond

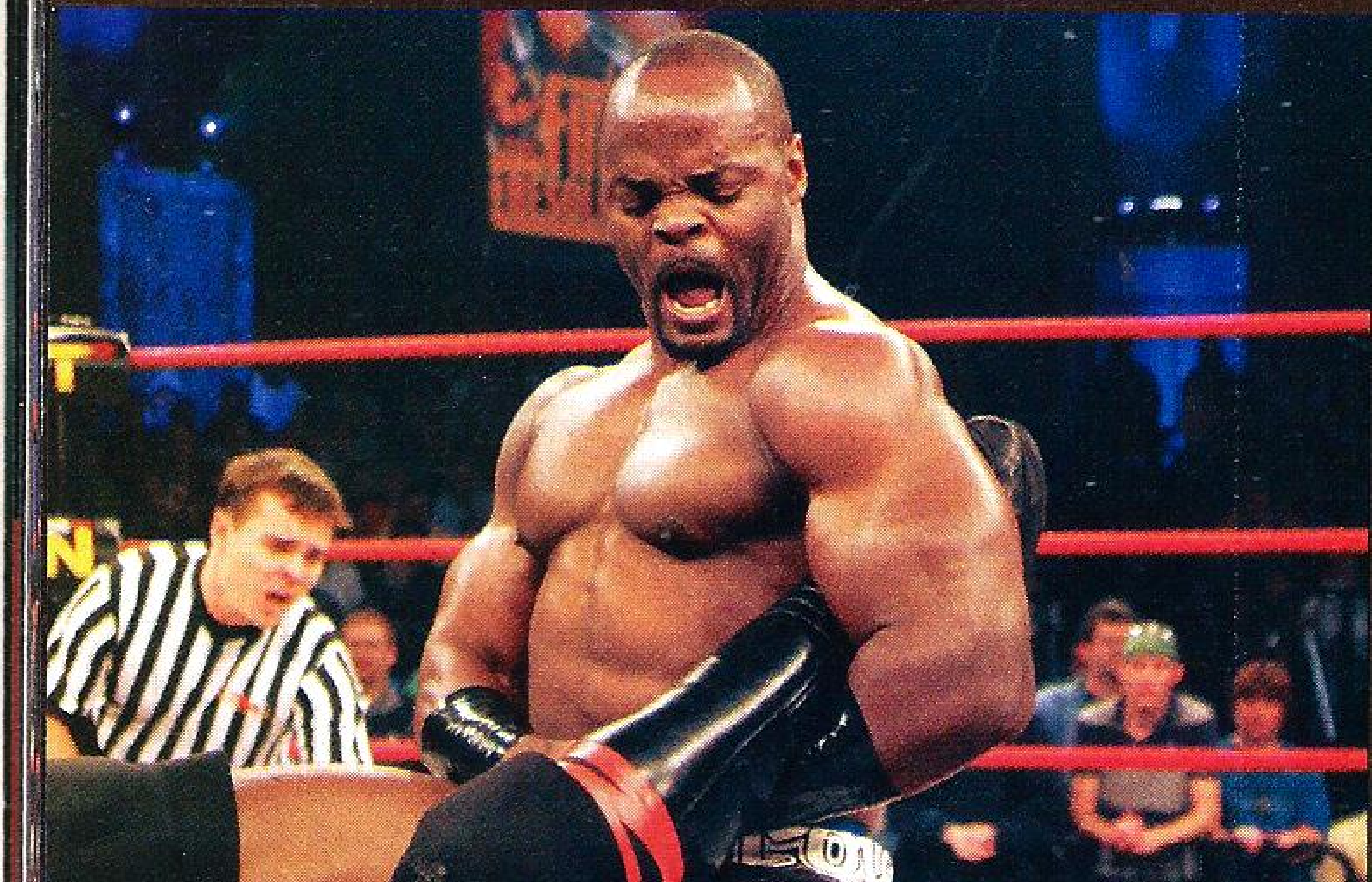
Ambition: To surpass A.J. Styles as the most respected aerialist in TNA

What He Has To Say: "What time is it? It's Prime Time, baby! It's *always* Prime Time!"

Analysis: Just how jaded have wrestling fans become?

In 1982, Jimmy Snuka climbed to the top of a steel cage in Madison Square Garden and leapt off into immortality. The fact that he missed that amazing "Superfly Splash" aimed at Bob Backlund is barely remembered. What *is* remembered is that Snuka committed the most death-defying feat ever witnessed inside a wrestling ring at that time.

On December 5, 2004, Elix Skipper executed a move that made Snuka's glorious leap look as routine as a wristlock. At Turning Point, Skipper climbed to the top of the "Six Sides Of Steel" cage, balanced precariously on top just as Sunka did. Then he walked tightrope-style several feet, jumped, wrapped his knees around Chris Harris' jaw, and executed the most stunning huracanrana ever off the top of a 15-foot steel cage.



Elix Skipper's shining moment in TNA thus far has been his execution of the most memorable move any wrestling fan may ever see. Regardless of that moment, Skipper has been relegated to little more than preliminary talent status—for now.

The fans went berserk. The move was featured on each and every TNA highlight reel, and the fans in attendance gave Skipper an unforgettable standing ovation.

That was more than a year-and-a-half ago. A year-and-a-half after Snuka made his leap of faith, he was the top fan favorite in the WWF and was receiving shots at the Intercontinental and tag team titles. But a-year-and-a-half after Skipper's dive, he's virtually invisible from TNA programming. Sure, he and Young managed to steal a victory over Styles and Christopher Daniels on a May 25 edition of *Impact* (thanks to interference from America's Most Wanted), but other than that, Skipper is largely being skipped over.

He was stuck on the pre-show of Destination X. He lost to Shark Boy, Cassidy Riley, and Lance Hoyt at Against All Odds. In fact, his most prominent moment of the past year was *losing* to Chris Sabin, Sonjay Dutt, and Dale Torborg—a match remembered purely because Chicago White Sox catcher A.J. Pierzynski was ringside. Ironically, that match took place one year after that incredible huracanrana.

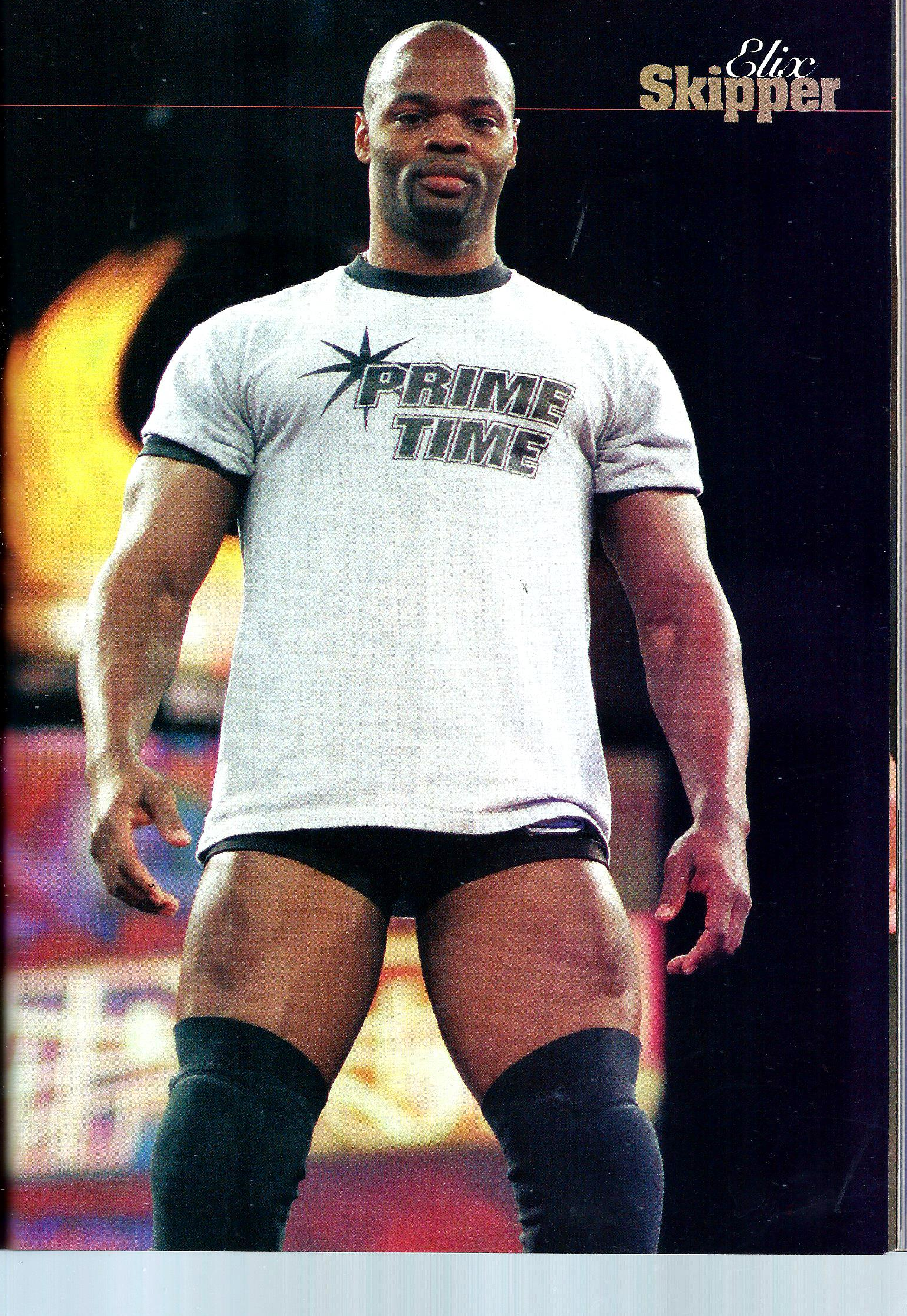
What happened? How did Skipper—a two-time NWA World tag team champion and former WCW cruiserweight champion—just fade away, after performing arguably the most breathtaking move in TNA history?

"Obviously, there's a conspiracy against The Diamonds in the Rough, perpetrated by TNA management," responded Simon Diamond." I don't know if it's Zbyszko, if it's Cornette, if it's someone on Spike TV, or what. All I know is that Elix and David are *true* diamonds in the rough, and it's about time the matchmakers and powers-that-be around here stood up and took notice."

Believe it or not, Diamond may actually have a point. Can it be that TNA fans have actually forgotten that huracanrana? Have they seen so much take place between 1982 and today—from the WrestleManias through ECW through the X division thrill fests—that one incredible move, one that used to be a *career-making* move, is now simply forgotten moments after it occurred?

It's either that, or Diamond may be right. We're not sure which explanation we find more difficult to believe.

Elix Skipper



Homicide

Current Role: The enforcer of Konnan's LAX faction

Ambition: To win the X division title and defend it against elite international competition

What He Has To Say: "Ask Samoa Joe what he has to say about Homicide. Ask Jay Lethal, or Christopher Daniels, or A.J. Styles. Ask anyone who knows anything about wrestling, and they'll tell you that I'm the baddest man here in TNA, or anywhere else."

Analysis: Just how important is loyalty?

Homicide—Konnan's hand-selected foot soldier—is the stiff, brawling heart and soul of the Latin American Exchange stable. His ability to absorb punishment is unmatched, his determination unquestioned, his tenacity unsurpassed.

During his years in Ring of Honor and throughout the independent scene, Homicide has established himself as one of the sport's top brawlers. But, few realize that he is also extremely knowledgeable in the art of submission wrestling and has surprised countless opponents with a perfectly executed triangle or guillotine choke to secure the victory.

Konnan was impressed with what he saw. In fact, he was so impressed that he took Homicide under his wing and helped him get his foot in the door of TNA as well as feature matches in Mexico and Puerto Rico. Konnan opened doors for Homicide, and Homicide paid him back by getting his back in the LAX.

But the LAX has under-performed in TNA. Konnan has been hobbled by a variety of injuries and may never quite live down the humiliation of being embarrassed by Bob Armstrong in an arm-wrestling contest. Founding member Apolo was booted from the group, followed by Machete. Hernandez has to wonder if his spot in the group is really secure, or if he's just the latest in a revolving door of third members.

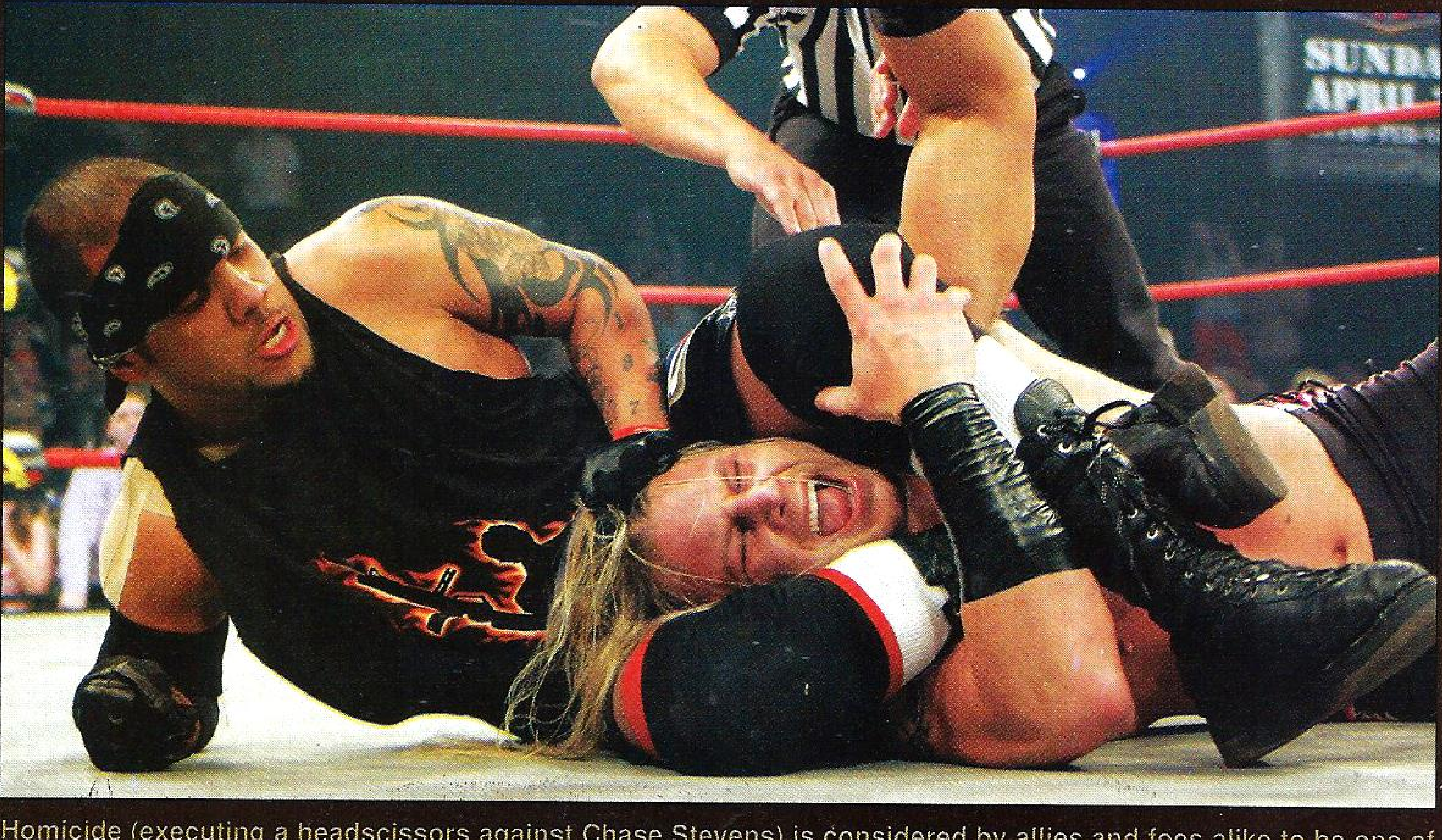
This wasn't the bill of goods Konnan sold Homicide.

Instead of competing on *Impact*, Homicide has been stuck at the TNA Spanish announce table for several weeks. Not only is he not receiving title shots, Homicide has been having trouble just getting matches, all because Homicide is loyal to Konnan. But even loyalty has to have its limits.

Homicide wouldn't comment—or, more accurately, his response couldn't be printed in a family magazine. But one wrestler who has faced Homicide many times in the past wasn't afraid to speak his mind.

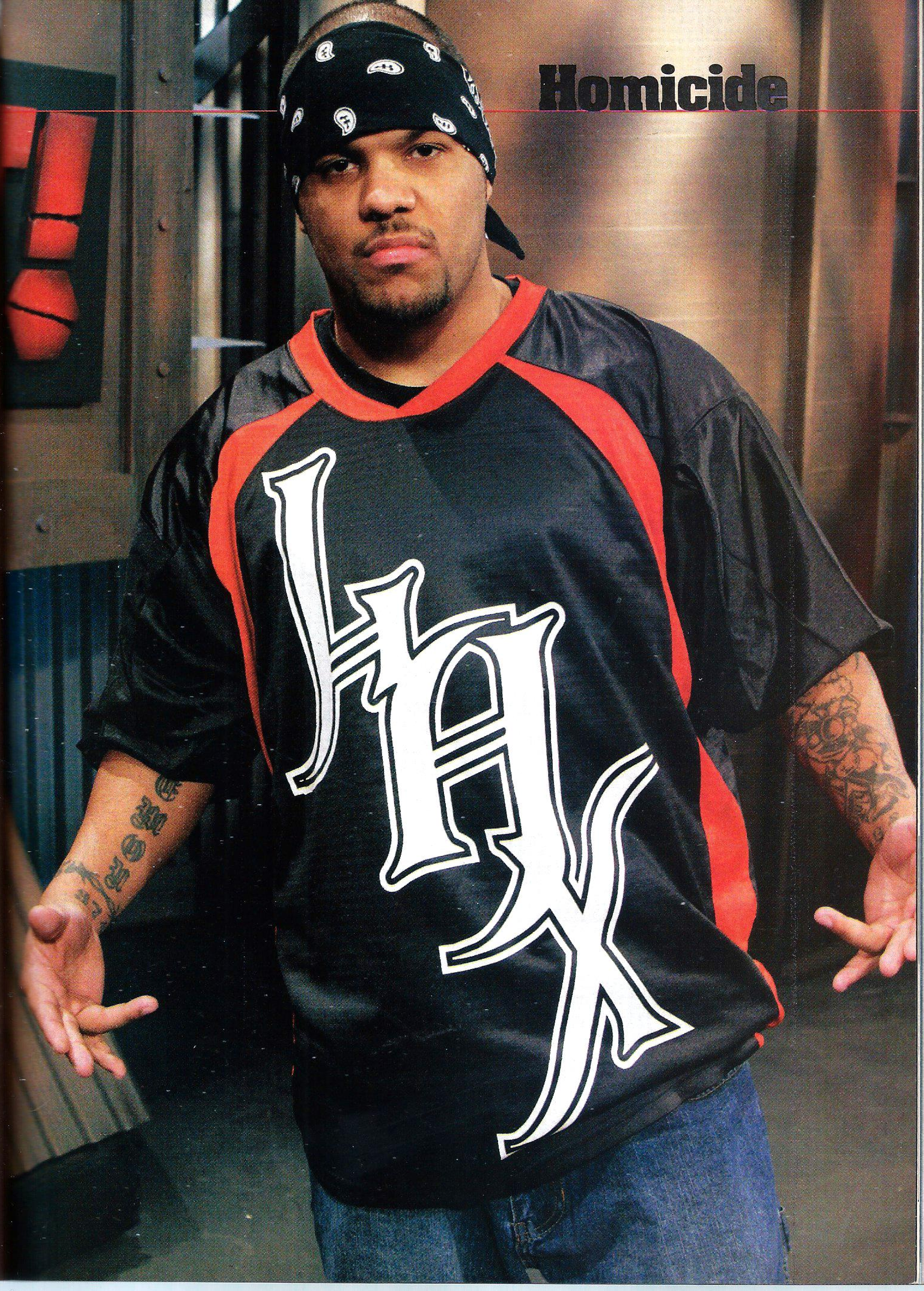
"I don't know the specifics of Homicide's situation within LAX, and I don't really care to, but I will say this—he is one of the most driven S.O.B.s I've ever faced," said reigning X division champion Samoa Joe. "He's only happy when he's wreaking havoc in the ring, and, since he's not getting too many matches these days, I'd imagine he's pretty ticked off. Of course, he's always ticked off, so it's hard to tell."

Konnan denies there is any friction within the LAX and that reports to the contrary have been planted by the group's enemies. But Homicide has been uncharacteristically quiet as of late—perhaps too quiet. They say still waters run deep. If that's the case, Homicide may well be wondering if joining the LAX was the biggest mistake he ever made.



Homicide (executing a headscissors against Chase Stevens) is considered by allies and foes alike to be one of the toughest men in professional wrestling today. As part of Konnan's LAX faction, he has taken a political stand that has left his promising TNA career in limbo for the time being.

Homicide



Johnny Devine

Current Role: Loyal foot soldier in Team Canada

Ambition: To remain healthy and to once again become a vital part of Team Canada

What He Has To Say: "My role in Team Canada? I'm the good looks, obviously."

Analysis: A lot of wrestlers are motivated by a desire to win title belts. Others are motivated by money or just a deep love of competition.

Johnny Devine is just happy to be alive today. That's all the motivation he needs.

Two years ago, Devine was stabbed in the abdomen outside a Nashville nightclub. It was a serious injury, and one that could potentially have been fatal had the knife punctured a major organ or artery (as it was, his gallbladder was removed). It took a long time for the wound to heal. Unfortunately, it didn't heal correctly, which led to substantial swelling and additional surgery.

Devine was forced to cut back on his wrestling schedule and left TNA while he recovered. During his time away from the ring, Devine began writing online commentaries for SLAM! Wrestling, based in his native Canada. He also had plenty of time to think about his wrestling career and to put things in perspective.

"Something like that reminds you that your life can change in a moment," Devine said. "You have no choice but to re-evaluate what's truly important in your life and what's really not as important as you may have thought."

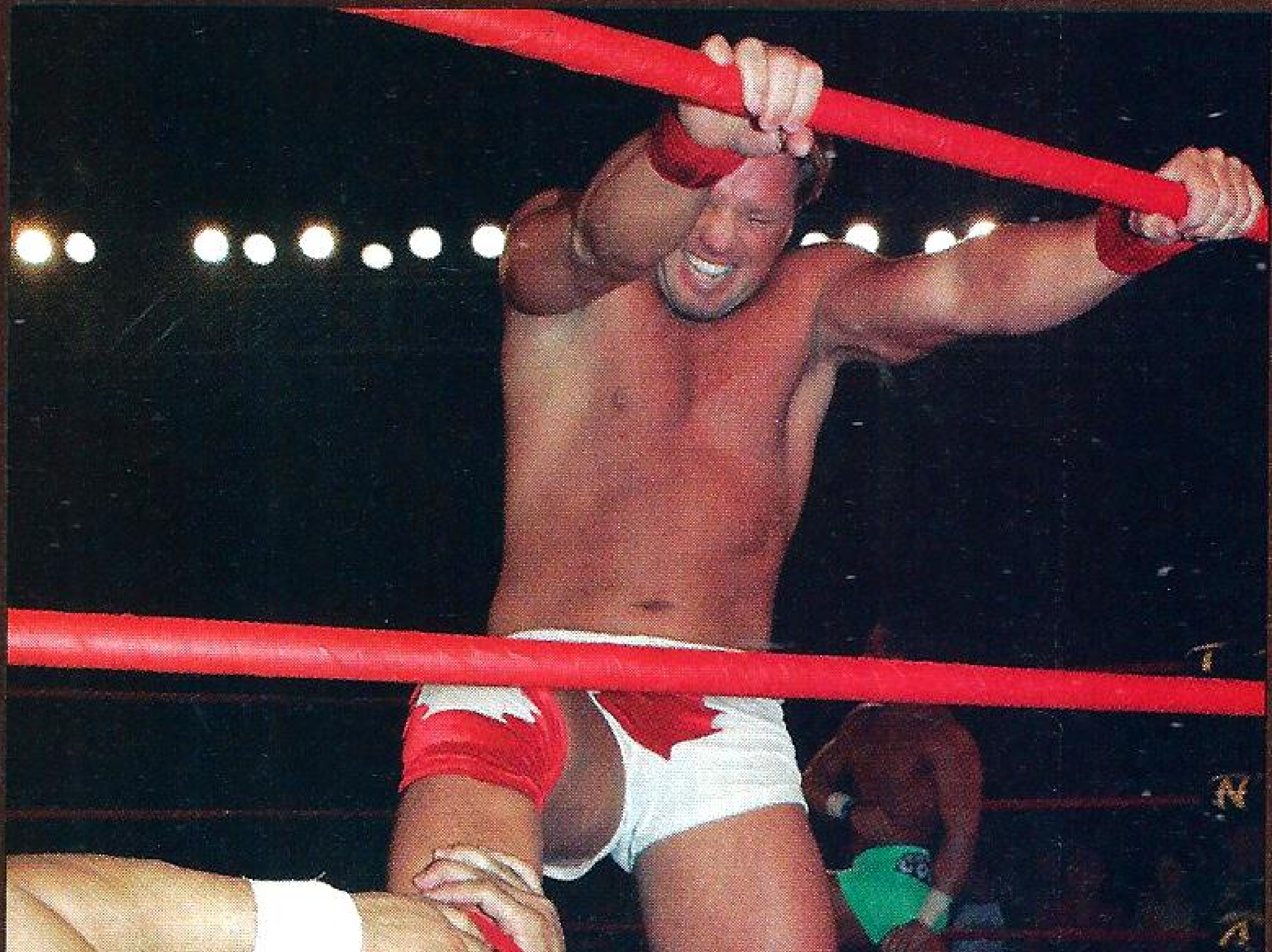
He maintained contact with Scott D'Amore and the rest of the members of Team Canada during his recovery and eventually made his return to TNA at Turning Point 2004. But bad luck struck once again as he tore his MCL and ACL and was out of action for another four months. In May 2006, Devine once again returned to TNA—fit, healthy, and ready to get back into the thick of the action.

"Right now, I'm looking at doing more tag team wrestling, either with Eric Young or A1," Devine said. "Coach D'Amore has certainly gone out and made plenty of enemies for us, so there are plenty of opponents who all want a piece of us, which is exactly how I like it. Bring 'em on—Team 3D, The James Gang, whoever. Team Canada will knock 'em all down just the same."

If Devine's attitude seems cavalier, it only stands to reason. After all, how intimidated can he be at the prospect of wrestling *anyone* after surviving a stabbing and making a successful comeback?

Devine's free-and-easy mindset is invaluable to the stability of Team Canada, a group that seems to be bound for dissension from the ranks as the group continues to expand. After all, there are only so many spots to go around. Now that Devine has returned and Tyson Dux has joined the group (which already includes A1, Young, Petey Williams, and Bobby Roode), it seems to be only natural that resentment will build and infighting will follow. But Devine's attitude helps keep the individual egos of Team Canada in check. His sense of humor has helped keep the team together.

"Hey, Coach D'Amore has a master plan, and I'm willing to do my part in that plan," Devine said. "Anything beats lying in a hospital bed with a hole in your belly, right?"



Johnny Devine's wrestling career—and life—were nearly drastically cut short when he was stabbed two years ago. Today, Devine considers himself very lucky, although the same can't be said for his opponents (such as a breathless Sonjay Dutt).

Johnny Devine

Chris Masters

"Not one of those guys can hold a candle to the powerful perfection that is 'The Masterpiece'"

THERE'S NO DOUBT that Chris "The Masterpiece" Masters possesses one of the most impressive physiques in all of professional wrestling. The chiseled 23-year-old stands an imposing 6'5", and there's not an ounce of fat on his 270-pound frame. Trained at Ultimate Pro Wrestling (UPW), Masters soon earned a contract, worked in OVW, and made his WWE debut in early 2005.

From the very outset of his career, the former amateur bodybuilder's superior strength has been his greatest asset, enabling him to turn a simple full-nelson into a deadly submission hold he calls, appropriately, "The Masterlock." Only a select few power wrestlers have been able to regularly gain submission victories with classic or modified versions of the hold. To date, no one has successfully broken the hold in a televised WWE event.

But Masters' phenomenal power has been a curse as well as a blessing. After gaining a lengthy string of victories early in his WWE stay, he has struggled of late, as opponents have figured out ways to negate his superior raw power.

Still relatively inexperienced in the ring, Masters has struggled to adjust when he's unable to apply his signature hold. Decisive losses to John Cena and Rob Van Dam and Masters' inability to wrest the Intercontinental championship set him back.

Masters has also had trouble functioning in tag team matches. The former OVW tag champion (with Brent Albright) formed a promising duo with Carlito Caribbean Cool. But the team imploded as both members' arrogant personalities and egotism led to their downfall against former champions Kane and The Big Show. The increasingly frustrated team broke up, with each partner blaming the other for their failure to win the belts. Now feuding openly, Carlito has been getting the majority of fan support—and victories. Nevertheless, time is still on Masters' side and, with considerable natural athletic ability to go along with his obvious strength, he remains a potential long-term star in WWE.

> **"Any hack can do a full-nelson. 'The Masterlock' is special; there's no comparison between the way 'The Masterpiece' applies it and what some old-timer used to do. They tinkered with the hold. I perfected it."**

Masters recently granted an interview to Contributing Writer Matt Brock. The cocky young star and the grizzled veteran reporter clashed over the significance of Masters' recent losses, his standing among the pantheon of power wrestlers, his feud with Carlito, and his long-term future.

Q: Chris, I've seen guys like Superstar Billy Graham, Billy Jack Haynes and Hercules Hernandez get submission wins using the full-nelson, but with the exception of Ken Patera's swinging neckbreaker, I've never seen a lights-out version quite like yours.

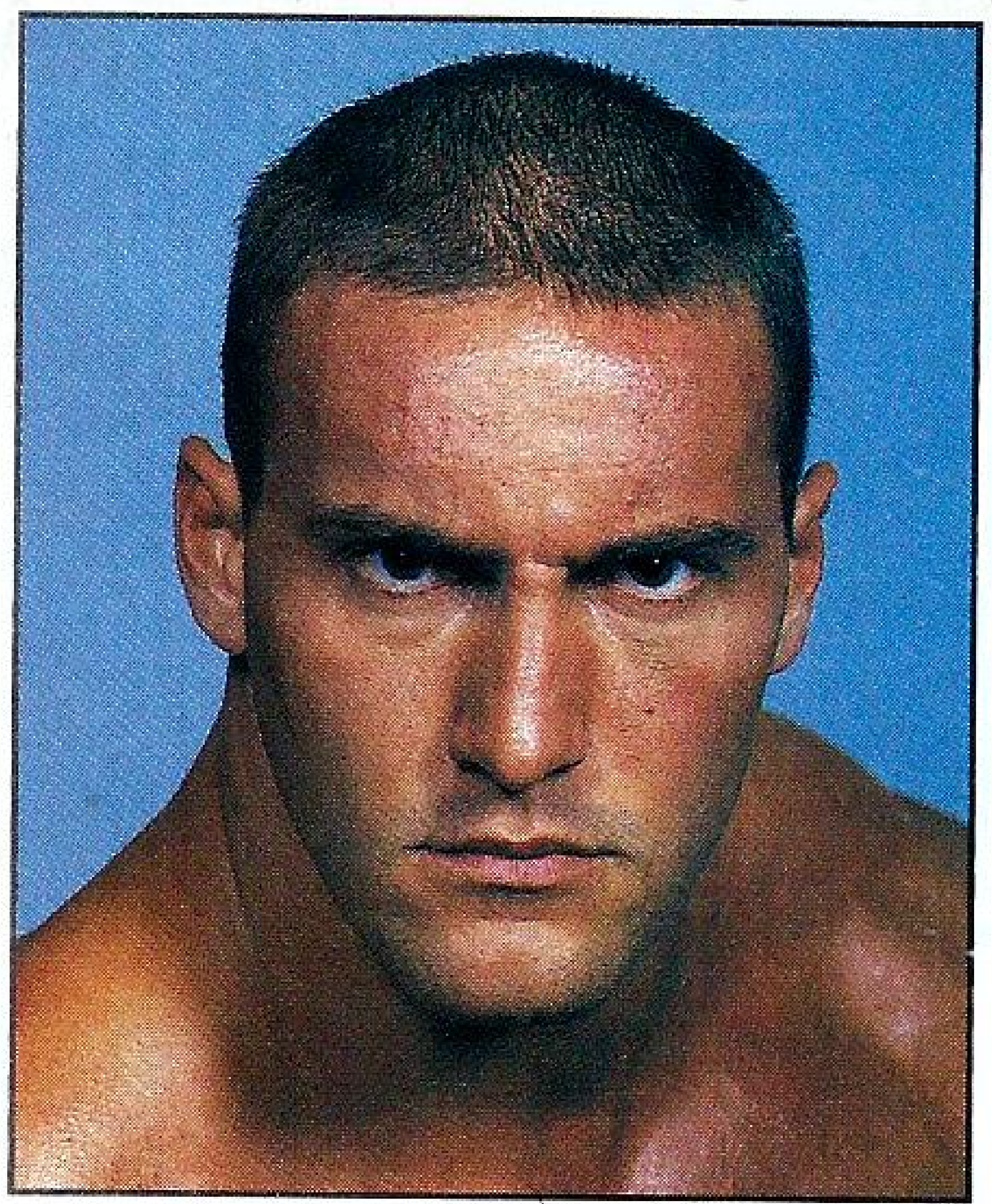
A: First of all, Brock, I don't use a full-nelson. Any hack can do a full-nelson. "The Masterlock" is special; there's no comparison between the way "The Masterpiece" applies it and what some old-timer used to do. They tinkered with the hold. I perfected it.

Q: Did you study the way they applied it?

A: Why should I waste my time doing that? You see, Brock, that's one of the billion differences between a flabby, drunken old slob like you and a brilliant physical specimen like Chris Masters. I don't have to strain my eyes squinting at some old tape of Haynes wrapping his ordinary full-nelson around "Playboy" Buddy Rose's pudgy arms. I don't need to read what you wrote about Graham or Patera in some dusty, 30-year-old issue of *Inside Wrestling*. They were fine for their time. Not one of those guys can hold a candle to the powerful perfection that is "The Masterpiece." The same goes for guys like Batista and Cena, too.

Q: "Powerful perfection," huh? As I recall, Graham and Patera were collecting major title belts before you were even born. Like him or hate him, Triple-H is arguably the most accomplished wrestler of this era. Cena is a two-time Raw

MASTERPIECE



"I'm just a 'Masterlock' away from the WWE title, and when I win it, I'll hold it longer than Hulk Hogan ever did. No one has broken 'The Masterlock' cleanly. That's a fact. And no one ever will."

World champion and Batista only gave up the Smackdown World title because he needed surgery. How many singles titles have you won, exactly?

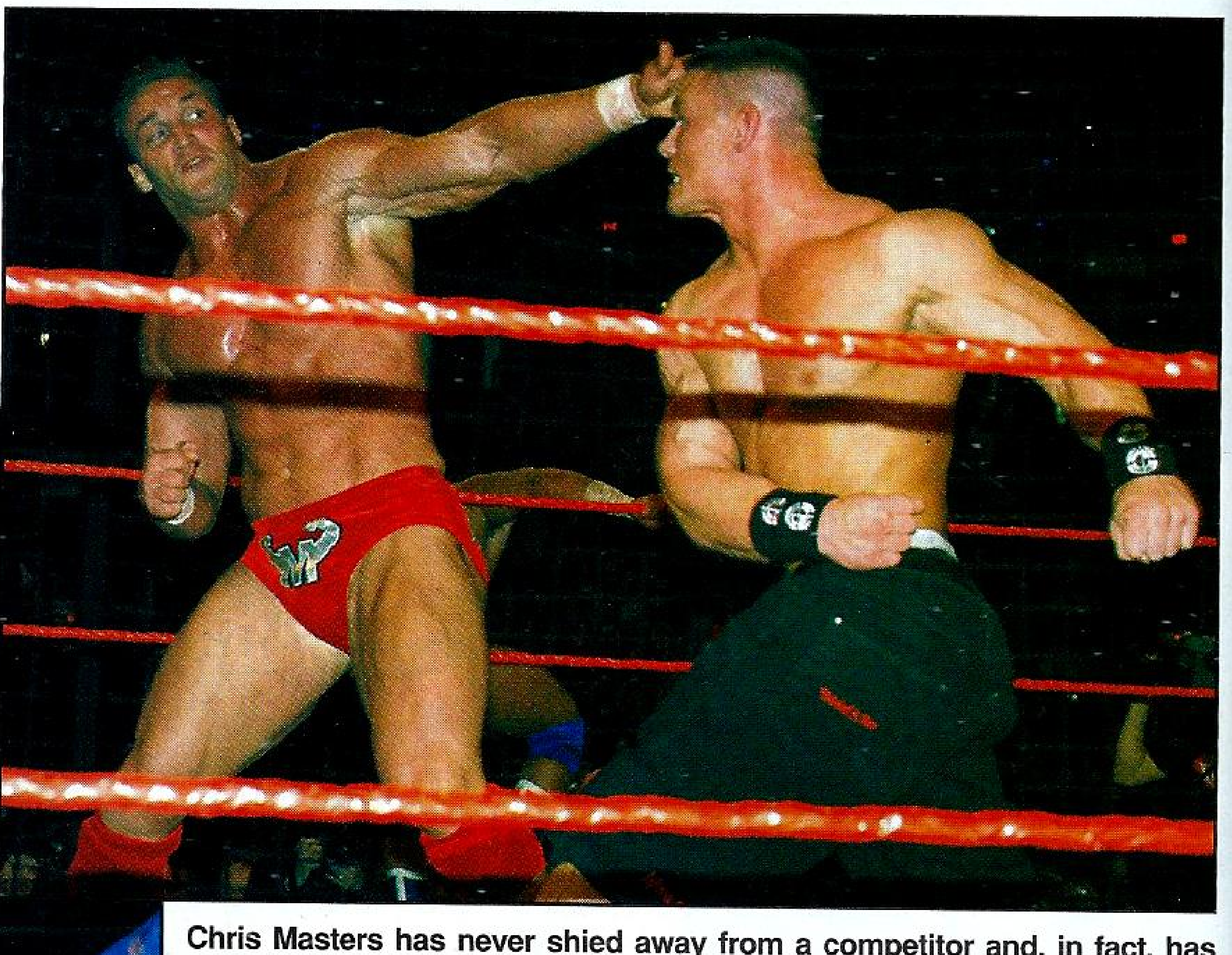
A: I just lost respect for you, old man. Is your eyesight really that bad? Is your feeble mind failing you? I'm just a "Masterlock" away from the WWE title, and, when I win it, I'll hold it longer than Hulk Hogan ever did. No one has broken "The Masterlock" cleanly. That's a fact. And no one ever will. I've already made Ric Flair quit to "The Masterlock;" I've made Shelton Benjamin give up; I even had Carlito yelping like the little annoying Chihuahua he is. I can do the same thing to Cena, Triple-H, Angle, you name it. That's why ever since the Elimination Chamber match, the only way Cena will agree to wrestle me is in a non-title match. I've already had him on the brink of submitting several times to "The Masterlock" but there's always been some sort of interference to break it up.

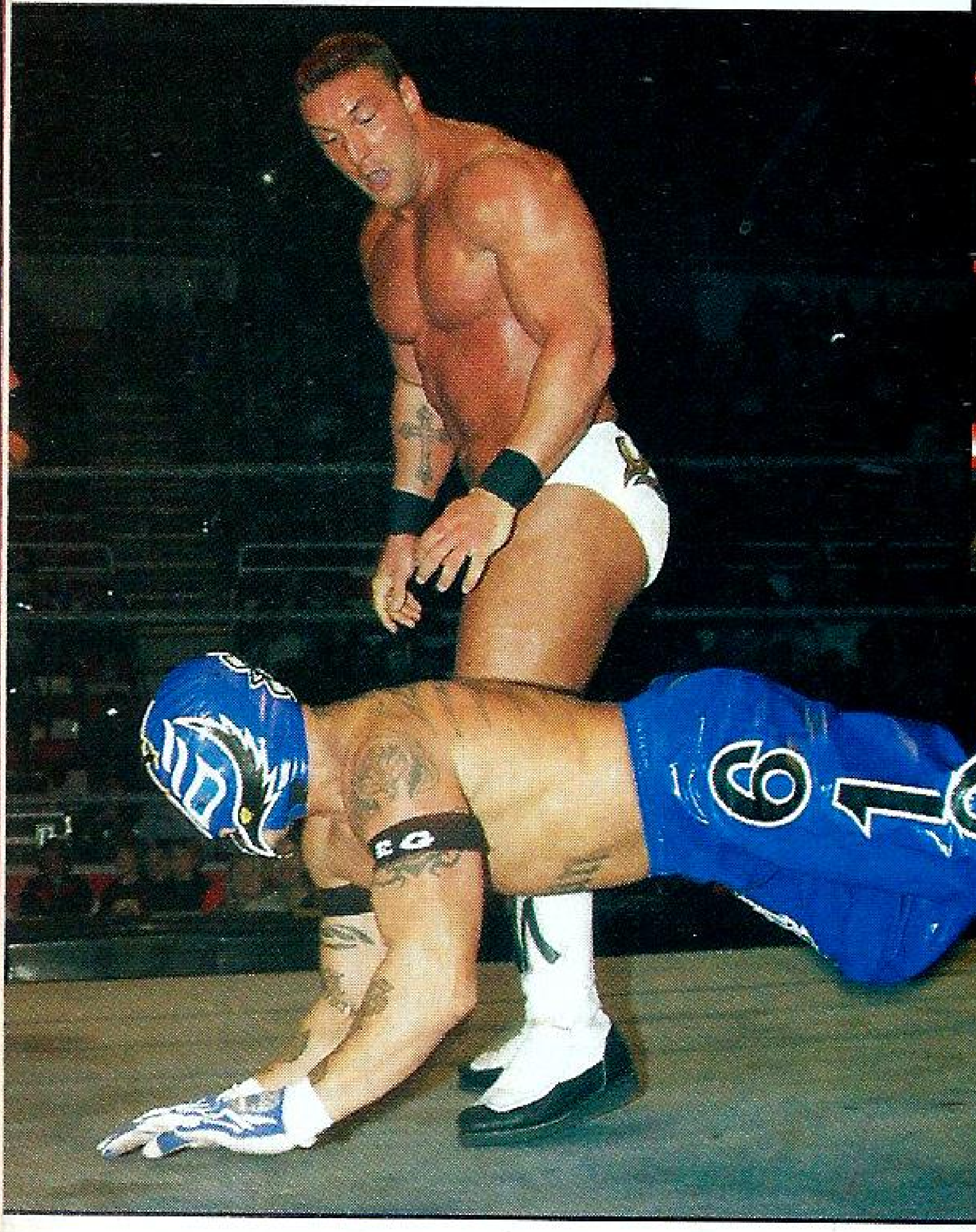
Q: Yeah, but usually the interference has been on *your* behalf, by the likes of The Spirit Squad or the McMahons.

A: Look, other people have their issues with guys like Cena, too. I'm not responsible for what they do, but I understand it. The fact of the matter is that no one has beaten me clean yet.

Q: Call me a cynic, kid. You're a fantastic athlete, but your won-loss record over the last three or four months reminds me more of Paul Roma or Jim Powers more so than Paul Orndorff or Jimmy Snuka. No one has beaten you cleanly, you say? Rob Van Dam has beaten you several times, and it always looked pretty clean to me. Cena made you tap out, not vice versa. Carlito beat you at Backlash. And I've started to lose track of how many tag matches you've come out on the losing side of lately.

A: See, here's the thing. There's so much jealously of "The Masterpiece" out there. In every single one of those matches, I've had my opponent out on their feet and ready to go down. But I've had slow counts and holds broken by refs when my opponent hasn't gotten to the ropes. I've had outside interference—both ways, I admit—cost me matches. Plus, I've had incompetent





Chris Masters has never shied away from a competitor and, in fact, has been in the ring with both the Smackdown (Misterio, left) and Raw (Cena, above) World champions. "The Masterpiece" has yet to experience WWE gold in his young career, yet, with his athleticism and strength, it may just be a matter of time before he does.

tag partners like Carlito. I've gotta level the playing field by cinching in "The Masterlock" sooner to get quicker submissions. I'm not worried.

Q: I think there's more to it than that. Frankly, until you vary your repertoire and rely less on bodyslams and that variation of Ivan Putski's "Polish Hammer" to set up "The Masterlock," I'm afraid you're going to continue to struggle to beat top opponents.

A: Really, Brock? You think it's possible to improve "The Masterpiece?" Explain how. I'm sure your drooling couch potato readers wanna know, and I can use a good laugh.

Q: I've seen plenty of kids with big muscles and bigger egos come and go. The guys who are successful are the ones who know how to take a body part and work on it for a good 10 minutes before they go for their finisher. Flair works the leg; the Andersons worked the arm; your "Masterlock" focuses on the head and neck. So if you'd develop a German suplex, use your leg power for a series of flying headscissors, focus on mat wrestling with front facelocks, or …

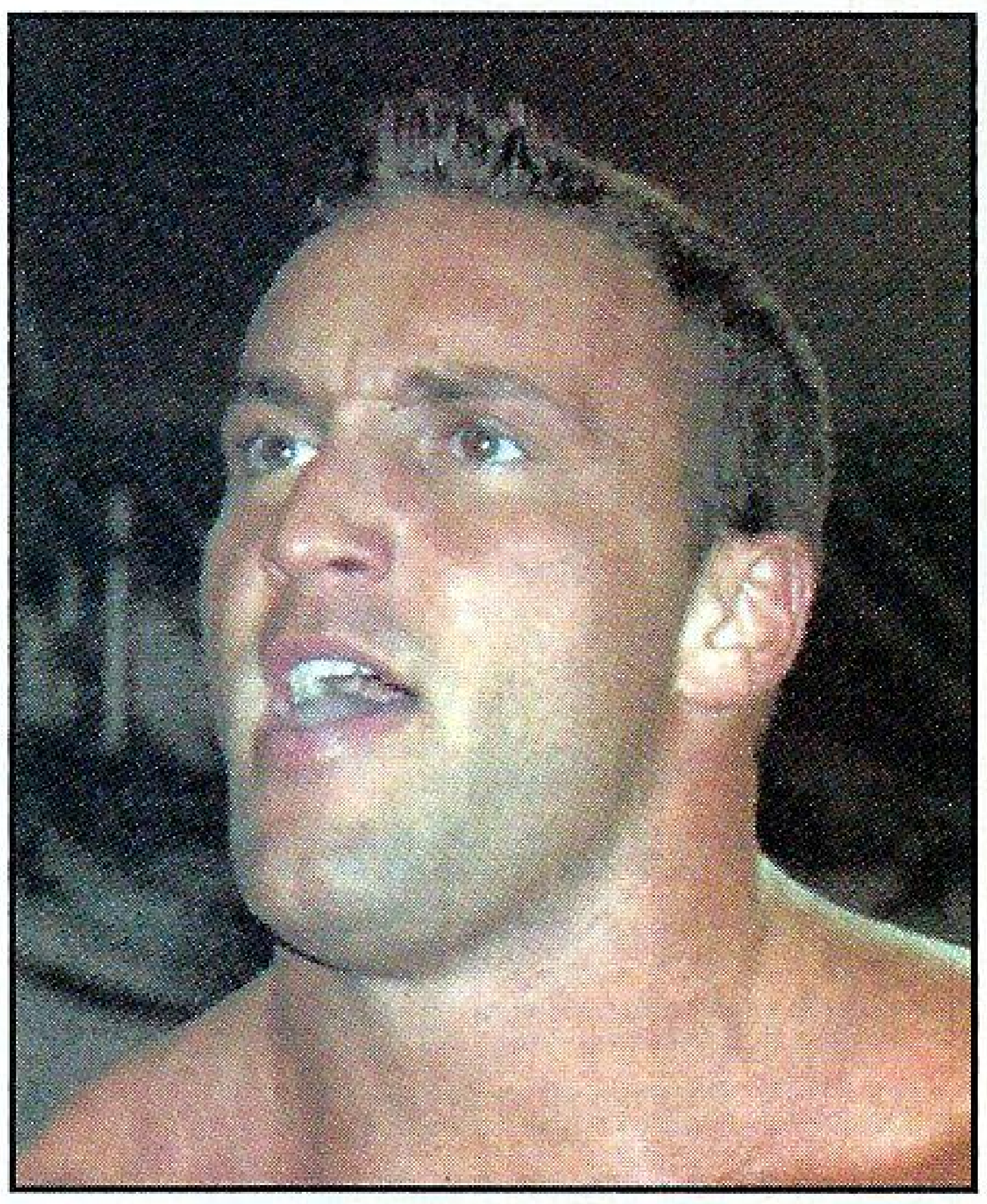
A: Enough! Man, you really *are* stuck in the past. Guess it's never occurred to you that I've already mastered all of those old-time moves and a bunch of new ones, but I rarely need 'em. No one can handle my power or strength, so why waste time?

Q: I'm starting to see why you and Carlito fell apart as a tag team and couldn't win the belts. You both were too impatient and unwilling to learn from your mistakes and too self-centered to function as a team.

A: Wrong again. The only reason we didn't take apart those two freaks, Big Show and Kane, is that Carlito is a gutless, conniving sleazebag. Every time I was saddled with him as a partner, it was like wrestling a handicap match. And even then, "The Masterpiece" nearly won the tag team titles all by himself. Come to think of it, maybe that's not a bad idea. At some point, I might decide to do just that.

Q: So what's next for Chris Masters?

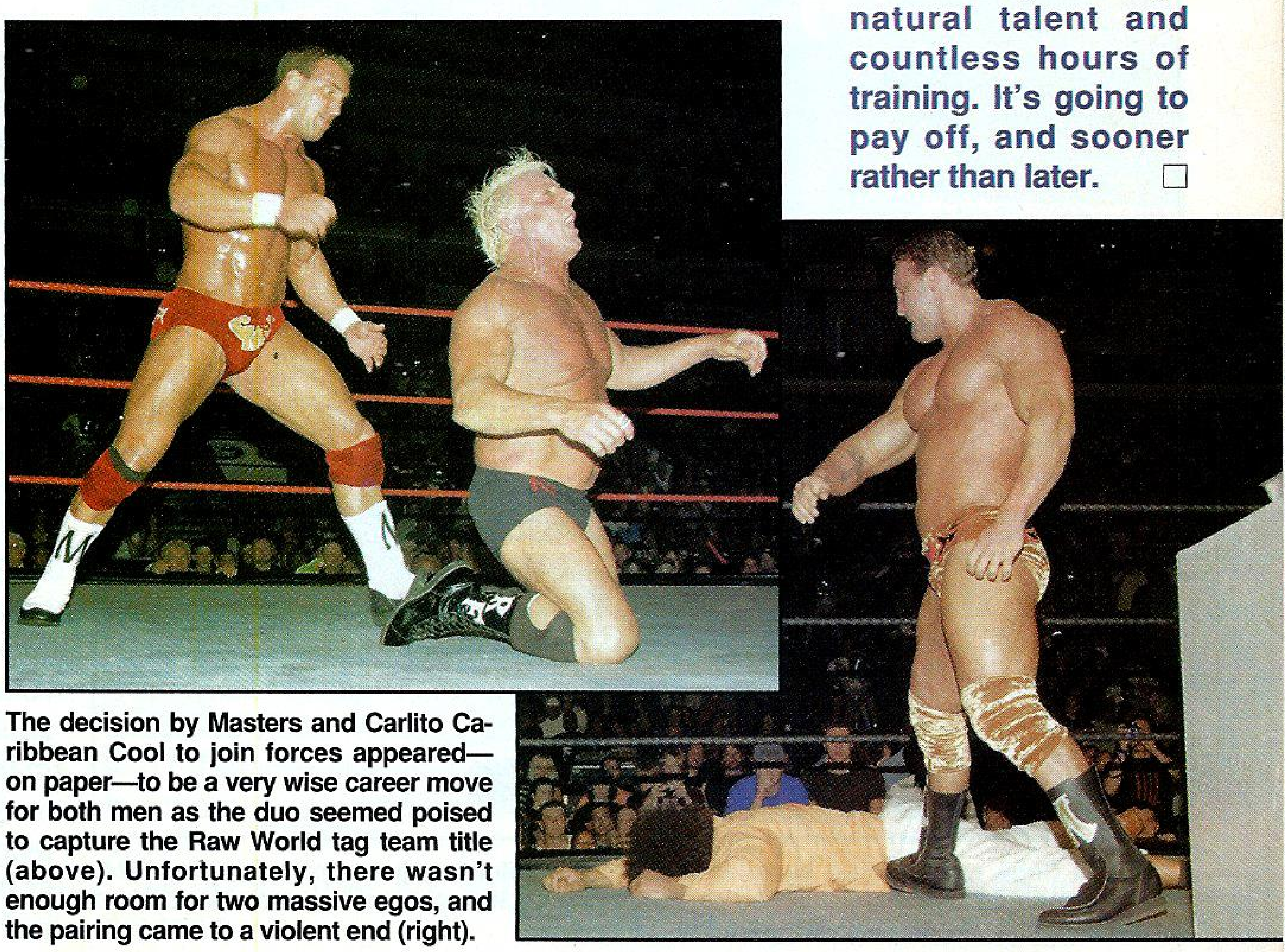
A: Finally, an intelligent question. I'm already getting bored with beating Carlito up, the so-called champions are ducking me, and the only people foolish enough to take the "Masterlock Challenge" anymore are desperate losers like Marty Jannetty. So I've let it be known that I'll take on anyone on the roster—whether it's Raw, Smackdown, or ECW. I don't care if it's a TV taping, pay-per-view, or house show. It seems like the only way I can force a fair title match—no four-way matches or non-title bout garbage—is to bang a bunch of heads, pile up the submissions with "The Masterlock," and then finally collect whatever title belts I want to collect. Chris Masters is the present *and* future of WWE.



"The only reason we didn't take apart those two freaks, Big Show and Kane, is that Carlito is a gutless, conniving sleazebag. Every time I was saddled with him as a partner, it was like wrestling a handicap match."

Q: I wish you luck.

A: Luck is for losers. "The Masterpiece" wasn't created by luck. I created this physique—this perfection in the ring—through natural talent and countless hours of training. It's going to pay off, and sooner rather than later. ☐



The decision by Masters and Carlito Caribbean Cool to join forces appeared—on paper—to be a very wise career move for both men as the duo seemed poised to capture the Raw World tag team title (above). Unfortunately, there wasn't enough room for two massive egos, and the pairing came to a violent end (right).

editors' roundtable

Is Spike TV Out Of Line For Making Content Demands On TNA?

> **"If Spike is going to support TNA and try to make it a success by dumping money into it and promoting the heck out if it, then it's hard to argue that they shouldn't have some input into the product."**
>
> **—Dave Lenker**

EARLIER THIS YEAR, a disturbing story emerged involving the interplay between TNA and Spike TV, the network that nationally televises TNA's TV show, ***Impact.*** *As is often the case where neither party is willing to speak on the record, the rumor mill is given free reign to "report" on the details, and that usually leads to distortions and exaggerations. In this case, however, logic dictates that there is at least a grain of truth behind the reports that Spike has begun to exert its influence over the makeup of TNA's roster.*

Assuming this is not a fabrication, the inference is that the network is using its power in a manner that might be in its best interest, but may not mesh with the overall business strategy of the promotion.

Was Sting signed at the urging of Spike TV? How about Scott Steiner? Well, despite early cynicism by observers, both men have been intricately involved in compelling TNA storylines. But what about the appearances by men such as Buff Bagwell, Rick Steiner, and Lex Luger? Were they included—albeit briefly—to appease the network's demand for added star power? What does the future hold? Will TNA be saddled with locker-room discontent if they offer choice spots on wrestling cards to wrestlers who have enjoyed national prominence, but who, in actuality, were last seen working for a dying promotion?

Inside Wrestling *Publisher Stu Saks, Managing Editor Frank Ingiosi, Senior Writer Will Welsh, and Contributing Editor Dave Lenker sat down to discuss what kind of influence SpikeTV should have on TNA and whether or not the network is out of line if it makes demands of the promotion.*

Christian Cage was the first wrestler to make the voluntary jump from WWE to TNA. His presence on the roster has led to TNA bringing in more well-known, established talent, which no doubt pleases Spike TV.

STU SAKS: Thanks for coming today, guys. As you know, TNA and Spike TV have a fairly good working relationship, but, earlier this year, Spike allegedly made some demands of TNA that put the promotion in a difficult position. Spike wanted bigger names on the roster in order to boost ratings, and TNA capitulated to those demands.

The perceived demands on content made by Spike TV has led TNA to bring in such names from the past as the enigmatic Scott Steiner (above) as well as perennial fan favorite Sting. Both signings have worked for TNA thus far.

What I want to discuss today is this: Assuming that the reports we've heard are correct, is Spike TV out of line for making demands on TNA? Does Spike have any right to demand anything from TNA? Frank, why don't we begin with you.

FRANK INGIOSI: With all due respect, Stu, I'm not sure the framework of your question is fair to either Spike or TNA.

SAKS: Explain.

INGIOSI: I don't think it's as black and white as Spike coming to TNA and saying you have to sign Sting or Scott Steiner or any other wrestler. I think that in no uncertain terms they informed TNA of the ratings level they would need in a new time slot and left it up to TNA to decide how it would get there.

SAKS: Whether they were specifically told what to do or not, that message still seems to be leading them in a particular direction. True?

INGIOSI: Those are your words, not mine.

SAKS: Well, then, let's turn to someone who didn't go to law school. Dave?

DAVE LENKER: Spike is investing a ton of money into TNA. It's backing the promotion 100 percent and doing everything within its power to ensure that TNA is a success. Let's be real: If not for Spike, TNA may have already folded. A lot of TNA's current success has to do with the support the promotion has received from Spike.

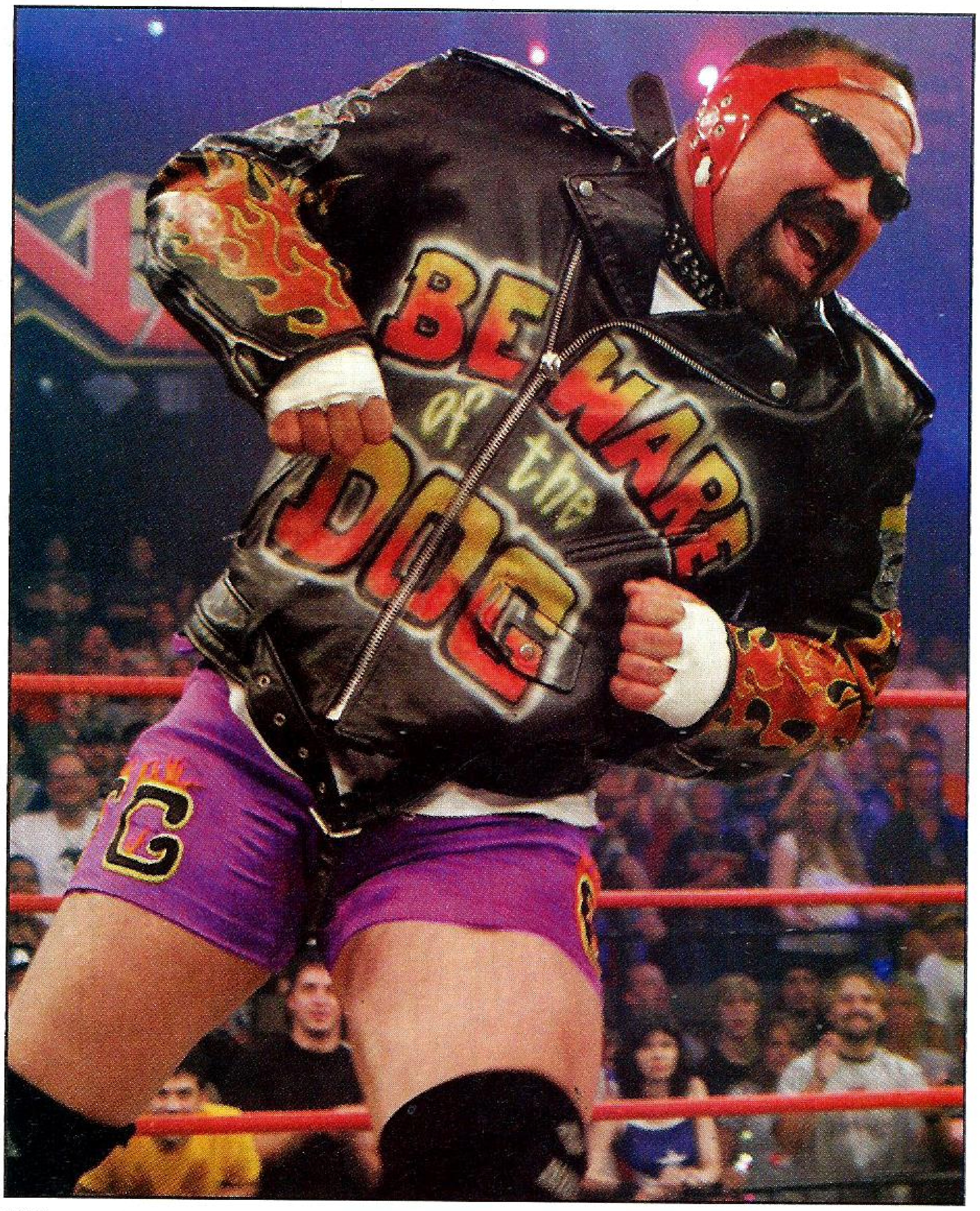
SAKS: But what does that have to do with Spike making demands of TNA?

LENKER: They're essentially partners in this venture. If Spike is going to support TNA and try to make it a success by dumping money into it and promoting the heck out if it, then it's hard to argue that they shouldn't have some input into the product. TNA isn't WWE; it's not a runaway success, at least not yet. It's still a work in progress, and Spike is currently a partner in its development. That's why it should have some say.

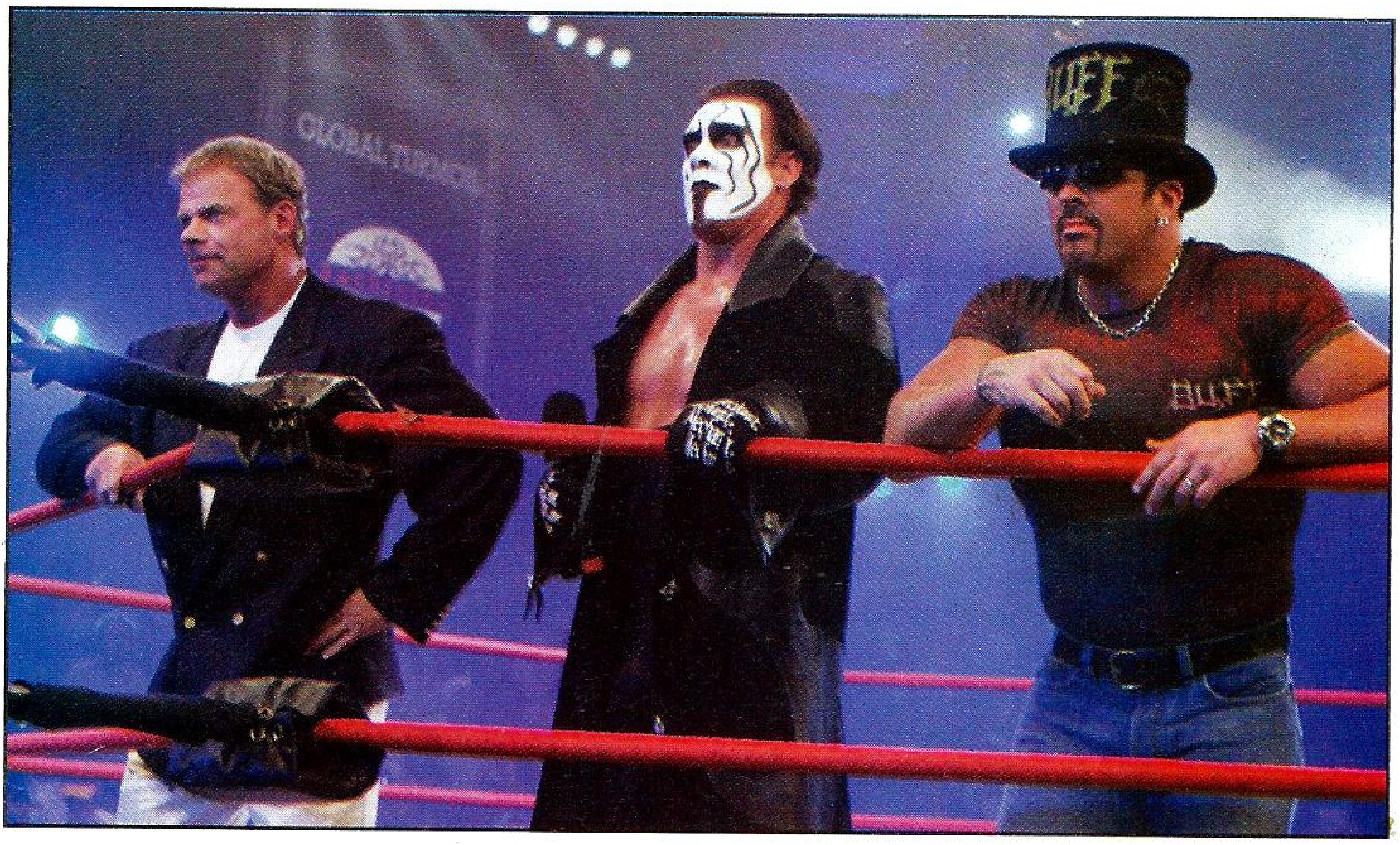
SAKS: You make valid points, Dave. Will, what are your thoughts?

WILL WELSH: It's hard to not agree with Dave. There's a lot of merit to his argument, and I agree with most of his points. Spike, while obviously not having its future riding on the success of TNA, will benefit significantly if TNA can achieve its upside potential. Also, it's clear that TNA needs Spike more than Spike needs TNA right now, which is yet another reason why Spike is allowed to influence TNA and make demands of the promotion at this stage of their relationship.

SAKS: So, you're saying that if TNA were at a level WWE was at



TNA may have been throwing Spike a bone by briefly including Lex Luger, Buff Bagwell (below, with Sting), and Rick Steiner (above) as part of a storyline. The gimmick—while not fatal to *Impact*'s ratings—was not as widely accepted by fans and seemed to indicate a strange change in direction for the promotion.



"Spike TV and its executives are in the business of building a network that appeals to males. They aren't wrestling executives or bookers. They don't know what works in terms of storylines and only have a very basic idea of what professional wrestling is."
—Will Welsh

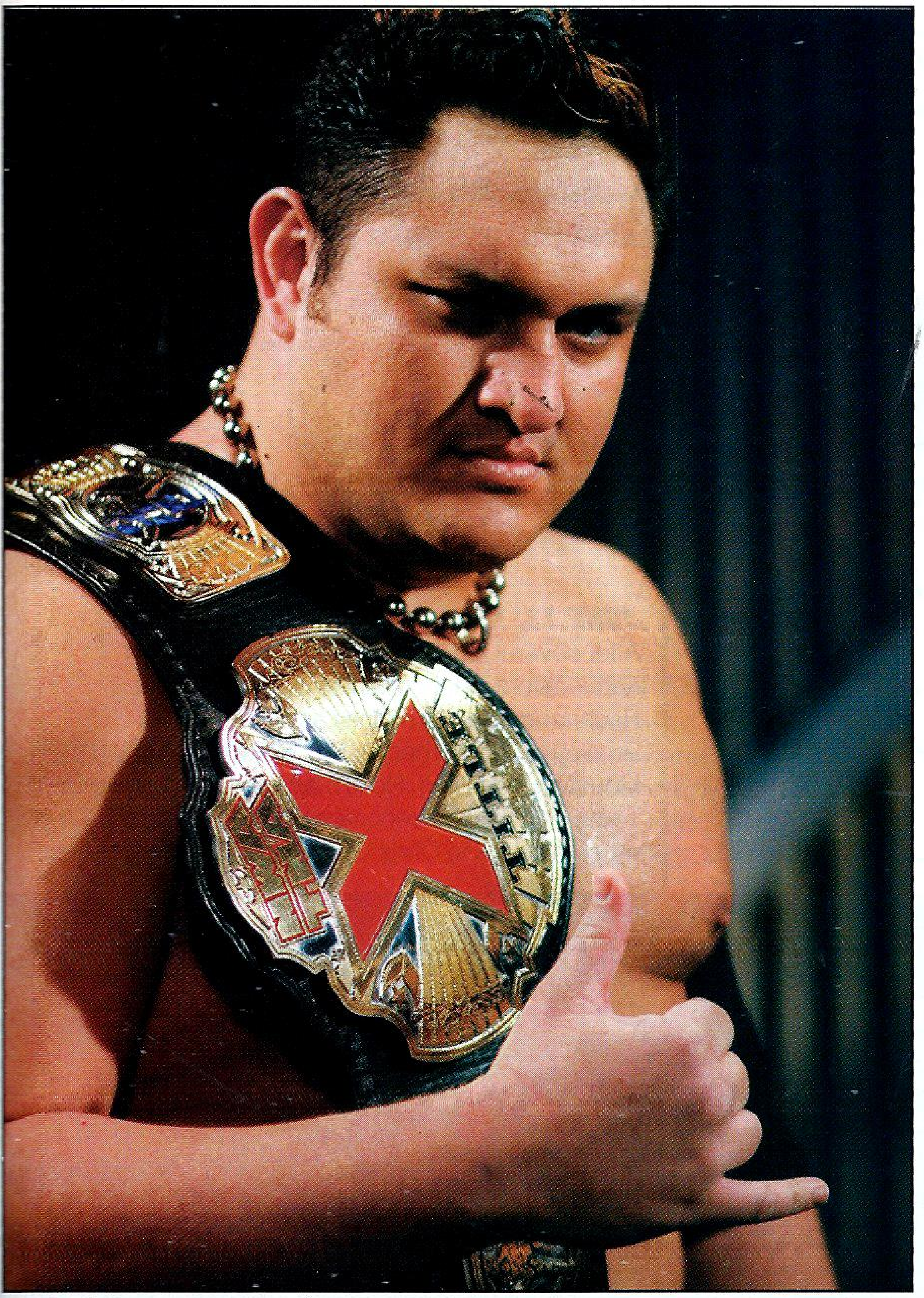
before it left the network, Spike would not be in a position to exert such influence?

LENKER: It's a business, Stu, and generally when two businesses enter a partnership, even a quasi-partnership, the one with more influence and more power has the upper hand and will use it as it sees fit. I'm not sure if that makes it right, but, if I'm a Spike TV executive, I'm going to do whatever I feel is best for the success of my network. If that means I have to demand things of TNA that its executives might not necessarily agree with, so be it. That's the way business works.

SAKS: Does that make it right, Frank?

INGIOSI: Not to be glib, but it's right if it works. The boys in the back and the press can bark all they want about signing Sting and Scott Steiner, but these guys are bringing numbers, and that ultimately makes the company stronger and benefits everybody. If Sting and Steiner don't pull their weight—especially after TNA had to extend themselves farther than they'd like to sign them—then there is a problem.

WELSH: That's true. Spike has a right to demand things of TNA—as long as the things that it is demanding don't break TNA's back. Spike wanted assurances that there would be some bigger names on TNA's



TNA's stated intent was to patiently build the promotion around its wealth of young talent—such as X champion Samoa Joe. While Spike TV may not share that philosophy, TNA must fight to maintain control over its creative content.

roster before improving its time slot. That, I think, is an acceptable demand from Spike. Now, if Spike had named names and demanded that those exact wrestlers be signed no matter the financial cost to TNA ... then I think they would've been overstepping their rights as a partner. Spike doesn't have a right to demand anything from TNA that would compromise TNA's operating budget or overall financial situation—unless Spike would agree to help defray whatever costs would occur due to its demands.

SAKS: I think I see what you're saying: Spike has a right to make demands as long as those demands are responsible and don't put TNA at risk of failure. Dave, how do Will's comments sound to you? Even though you said that you agree that Spike should have some say in regards to what happens on TNA, does a line have to be drawn?

LENKER: Stu, when I said that I believe that Spike should be able to make demands of TNA, I meant it only in terms of broad strokes. Spike should be allowed to say that it would like something to happen, but I agree with Will: Spike shouldn't be micromanaging TNA. The network has no right to say, *Go out and sign The Rock or Chris Jericho no matter what it does to your bottom line*, when, in reality, the promotion should be building around its own stars, like Samoa Joe. Spike also has no place telling TNA what it would like in terms of storyline development. There shouldn't be a Spike executive sitting in on TNA booking meetings and requesting storylines or giving his approval or disapproval over every storyline. That's not Spike's role in the partnership.

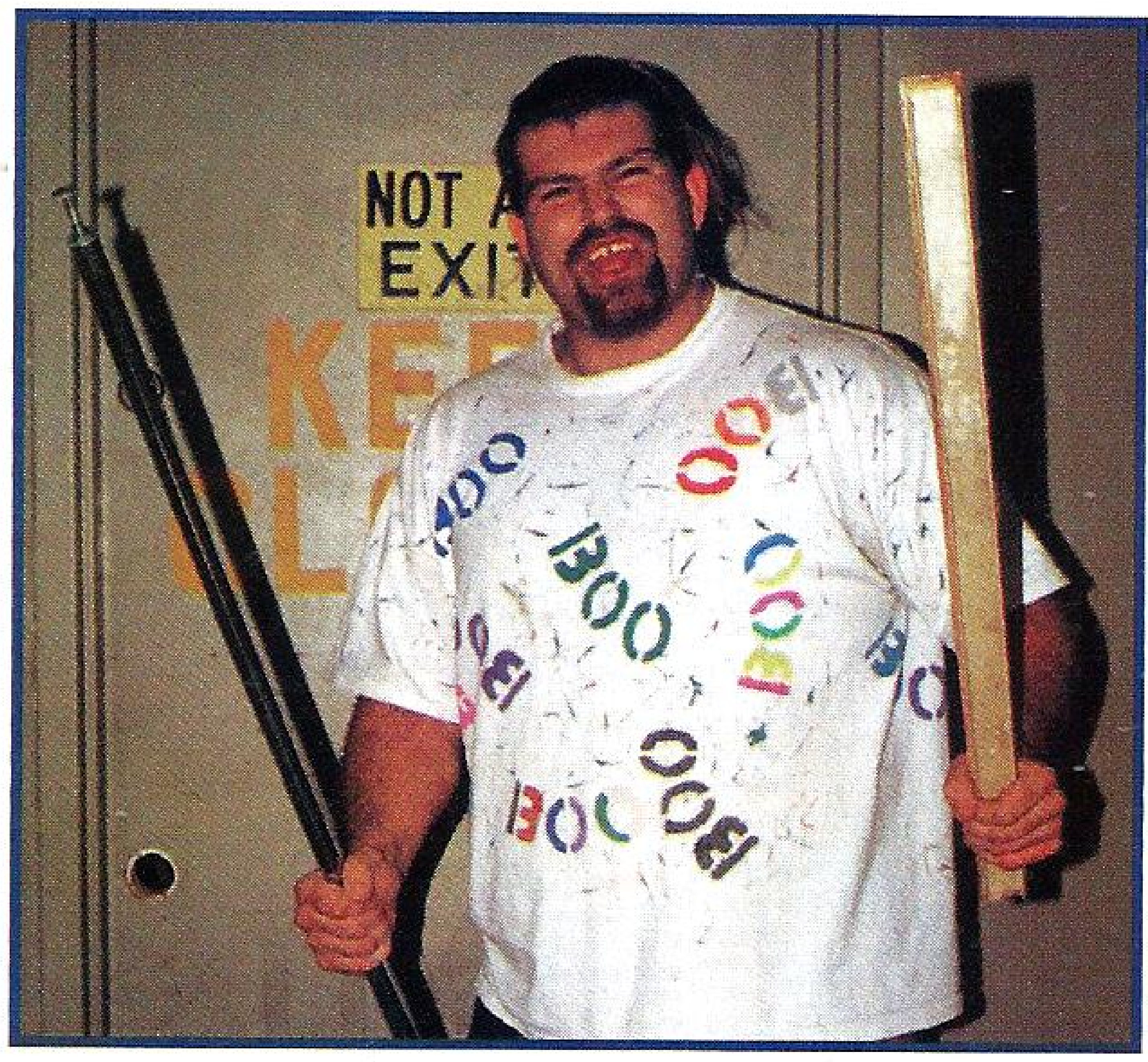
WELSH: Dave, I think you've hit it right on the head. Spike TV and its executives are in the business of building a network that appeals to males. They aren't wrestling executives or bookers. They don't know what works in terms of storylines and only have a very basic idea of what professional wrestling is. Spike should absolutely stay away from making demands on a micro scale. Again, I have no problems with Spike making big-picture demands, but when it gets down to the day-to-day affairs, Spike's involvement should be nil.

SAKS: Dave, we're running out of time, so why don't you give us some final thoughts.

LENKER: In a perfect world, Spike would have no say on TNA's content, roster, or anything else, and TNA's executives would be allowed to run the promotion exactly as they see fit without any outside interference. Unfortunately, it's not a perfect world, and, if TNA wants to continue to have a positive relationship with Spike, the promotion is going to have to bend to Spike's will every once and a while. One day, Spike will possibly ask for something that TNA might consider completely out of the question. Until that day happens, TNA should play nice with Spike.

SAKS: That sounds like good advice, Dave, and a good way to close this discussion. Thanks for participating, everyone. ☐

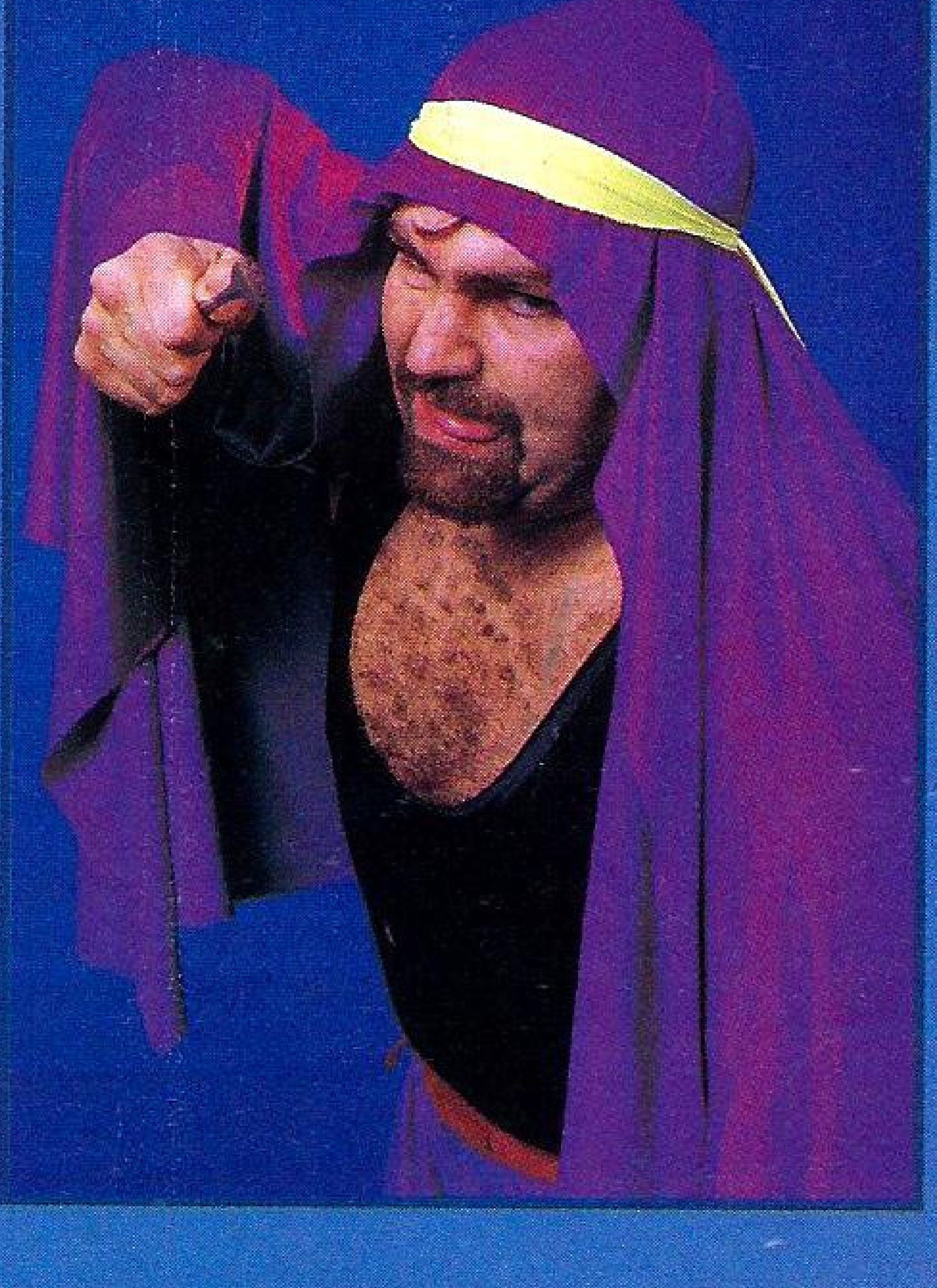
wrestling timeline



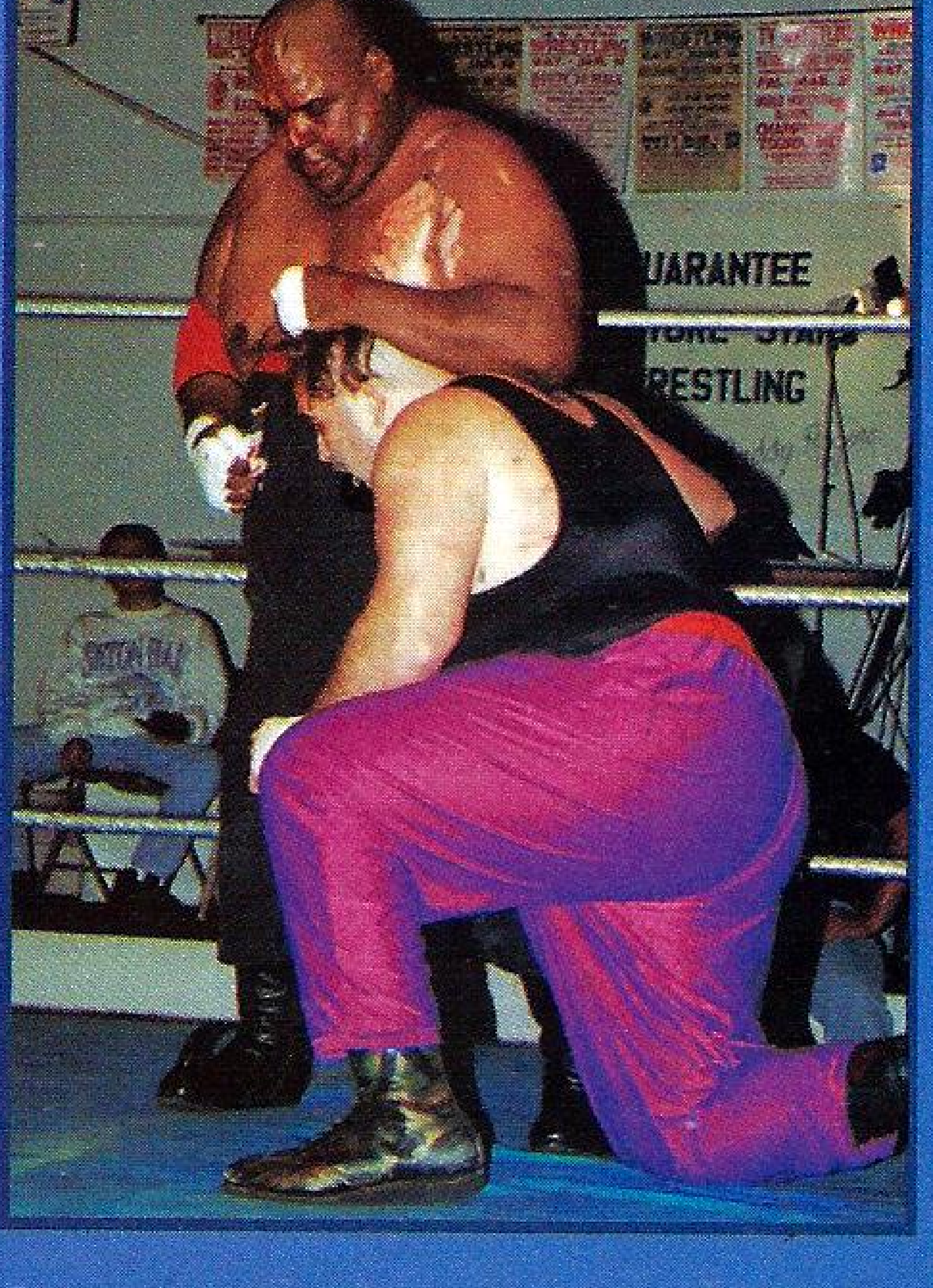
JUNE 13, 1994:
After several tours of Canada and the northeastern independent circuit, Rechner re-invents himself as Boo Bradley in Jim Cornette's Smokey Mountain Wrestling. He is managed by Tammy Sytch and becomes the dim-witted sidekick to Chris Candido.

APRIL 11, 1972:
Jonathan Rechner is born in Carteret, New Jersey—a stone's throw away from Nutley, New Jersey.

AUGUST 12, 1987:
Rechner debuts as Abuddah Singh—a tribute to The Sheik and Stampede Wrestling's Singh family—after training under Larry Sharpe.



SEPTEMBER 15, 1994:
As Abuddah Singh, Rechner spits a mouthful of kerosene into a handheld torch giving Abdullah the Butcher third degree burns on his chest and arm at a WWA show in New Jersey.



Mahoney

***Inside Wrestling* journeys back in time to examine the career of a superstar who has left a major imprint on the sport**

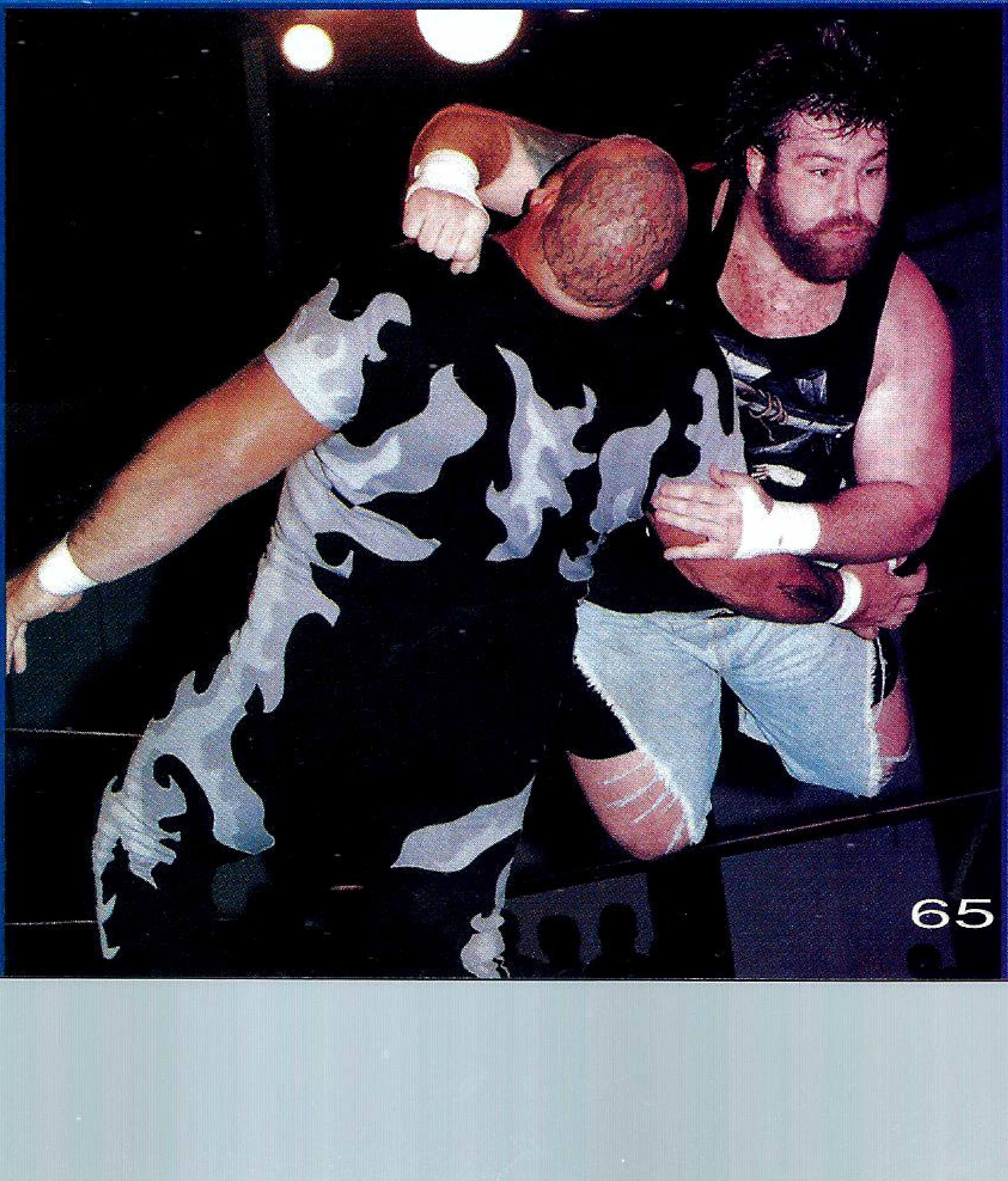
FEBRUARY 6, 1995:
Bradley wins his second SMW TV title, beating Buddy Landell.

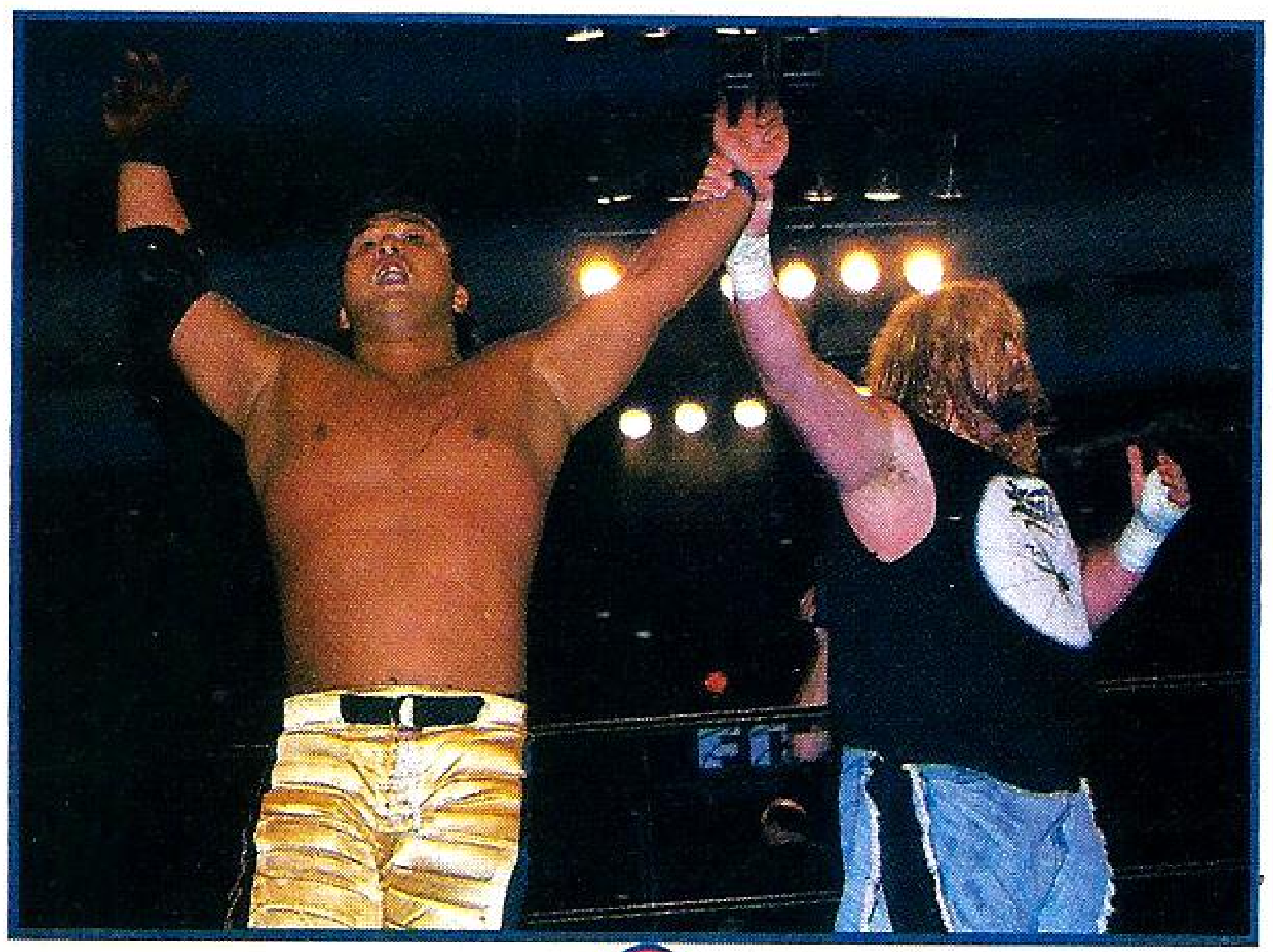
OCTOBER 13, 1996:
Boo Bradley defeats Knuckles Zanwich to win the Mid-Eastern Wrestling Federation Mid-Atlantic title.

NOVEMBER 30, 1997:
Mahoney makes his pay-per-view debut, teaming with Axl Rotten to face The FBI, New Jack and Kronus, and The Dudleys in a four-way tag team match at November To Remember.

DECEMBER 17, 1995:
Rechner makes his WWF debut in bizarre fashion, introduced by Ted DiBiase as "Xanta Klaus"—Santa's "evil twin"—at In Your House 5. Xanta also appears the following night on *Raw* before the gimmick is quickly dropped and Rechner returns to SMW.

JULY 19, 1997:
Competing under the name Mahoney, Rechner and Chris Chetti fall in a tag match with Chris Candido and Bam Bam Bigelow at ECW's Heatwave card.





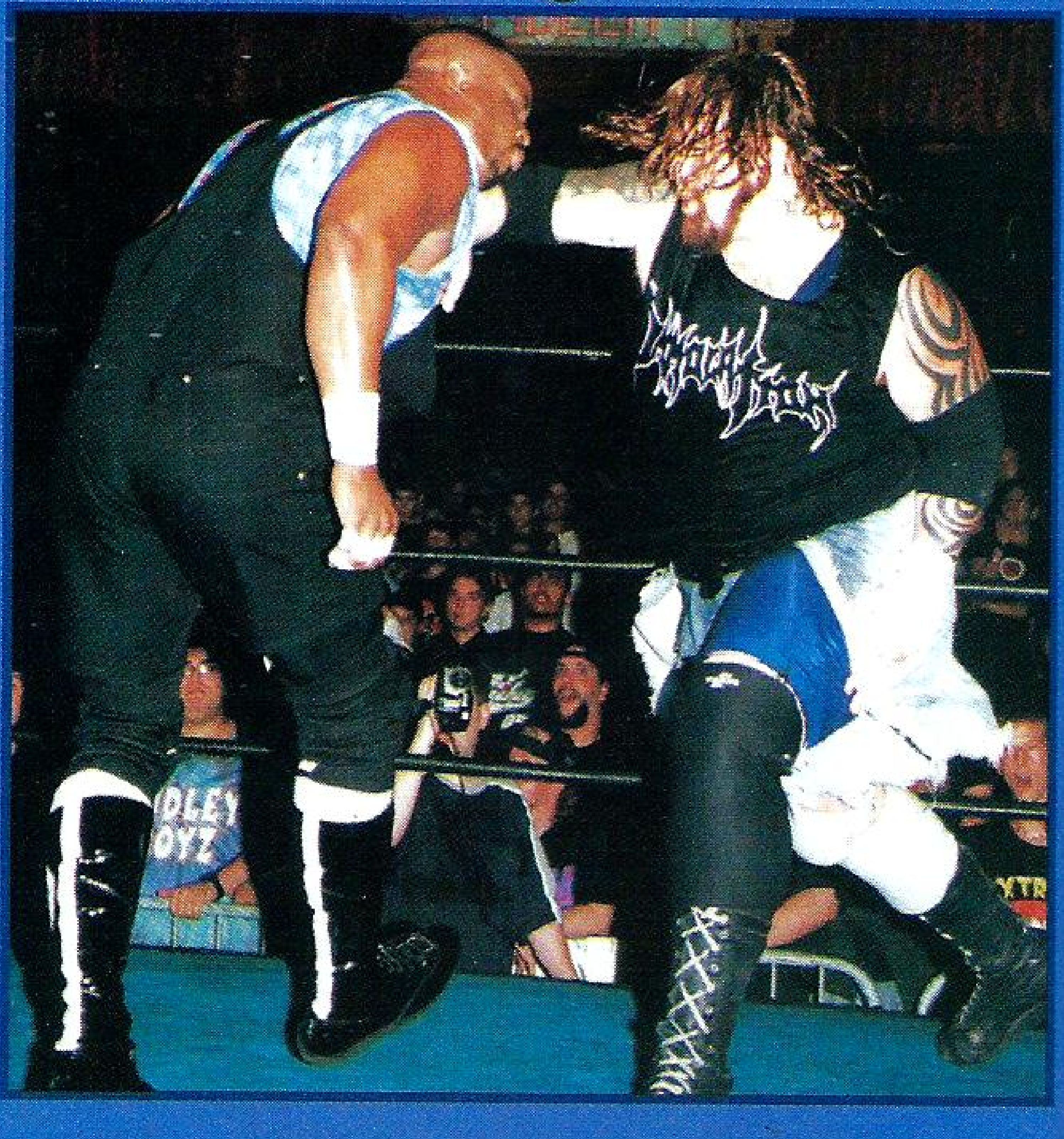
NOVEMBER 11, 1998: Mahoney and Masato Tanaka beat The Dudleys for the tag team title at November To Remember.

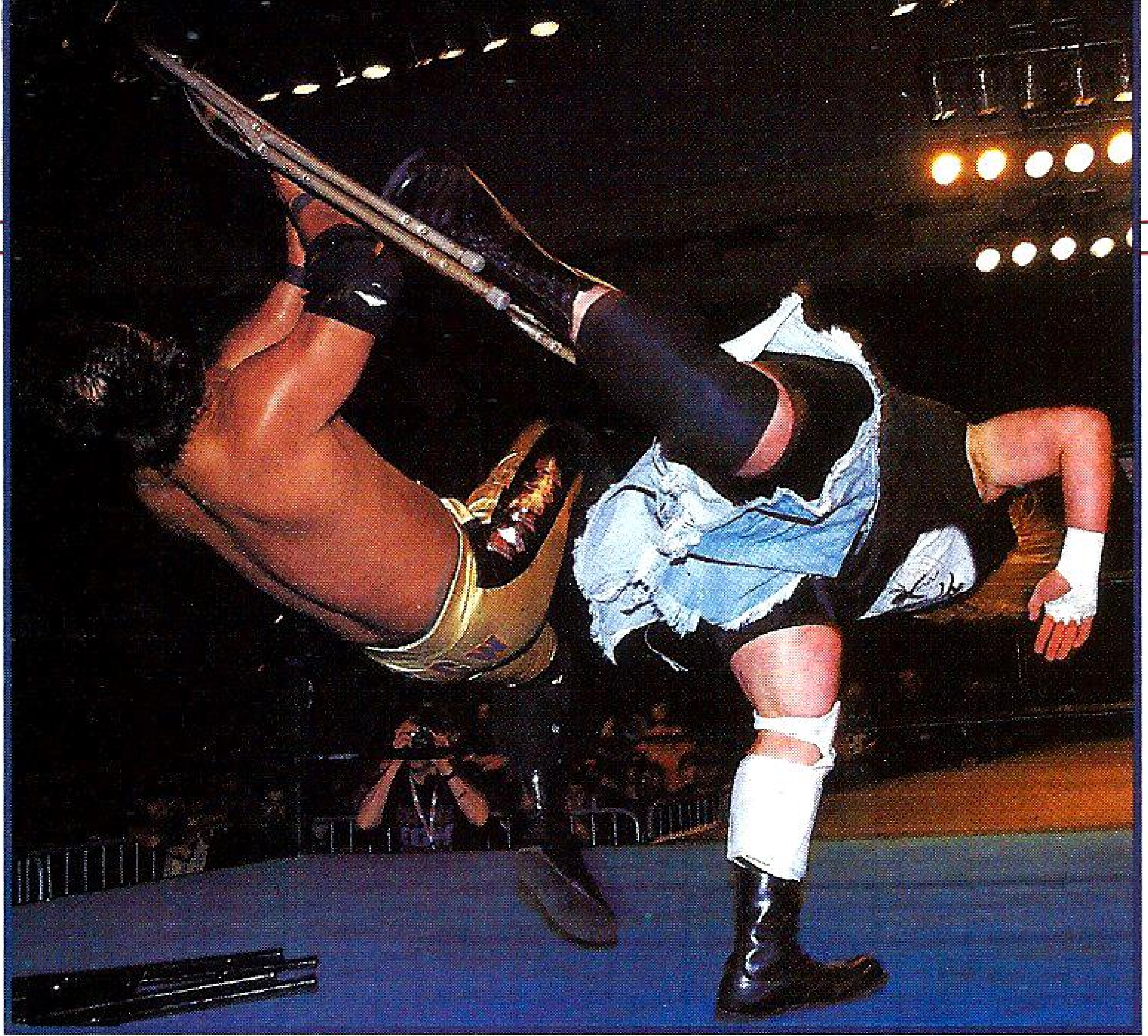
JULY 18, 1999: Mahoney and little Spike Dudley upset the Dudleys for the ECW tag belts in a Dayton streetfight in Dayton, Ohio, at Heatwave.

MAY 3, 1998: "The Chair-Swinging Freaks"—Mahoney and Rotten—get another shot at the tag title, but lose to Chris Candido and Lance Storm at Wrestlepalooza.

JULY 6, 1999: Mahoney and former "Chair-Swinging Freak" partner Axl Rotten have a vicious falling out that leads to a bitter feud.

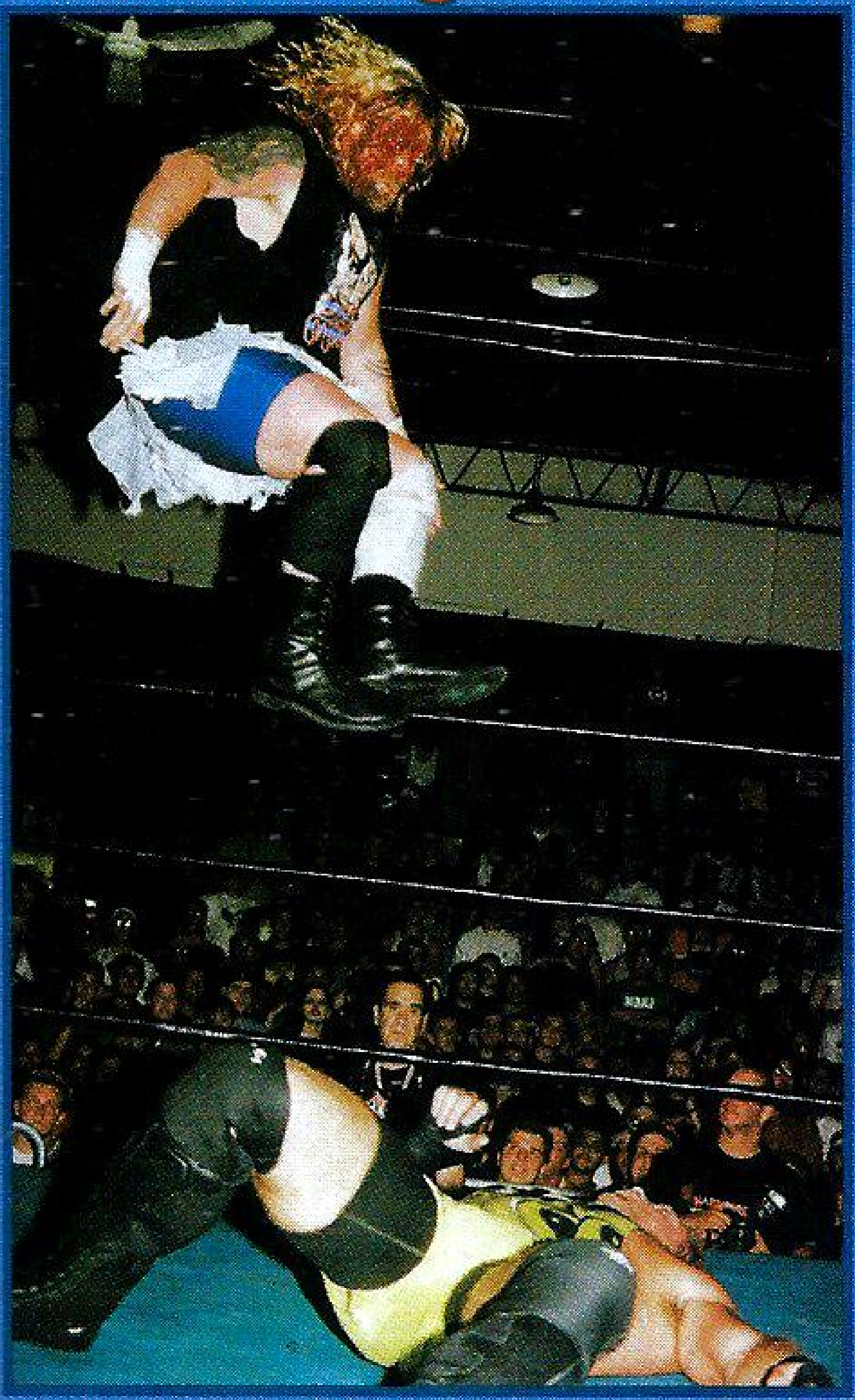
AUGUST 13, 1999: Mahoney and Spike lose the tag belts back to The Dudleys, only to regain them once more the following night.





AUGUST 26, 1999:
The Dudleys regain the belts from Spike and Mahoney.

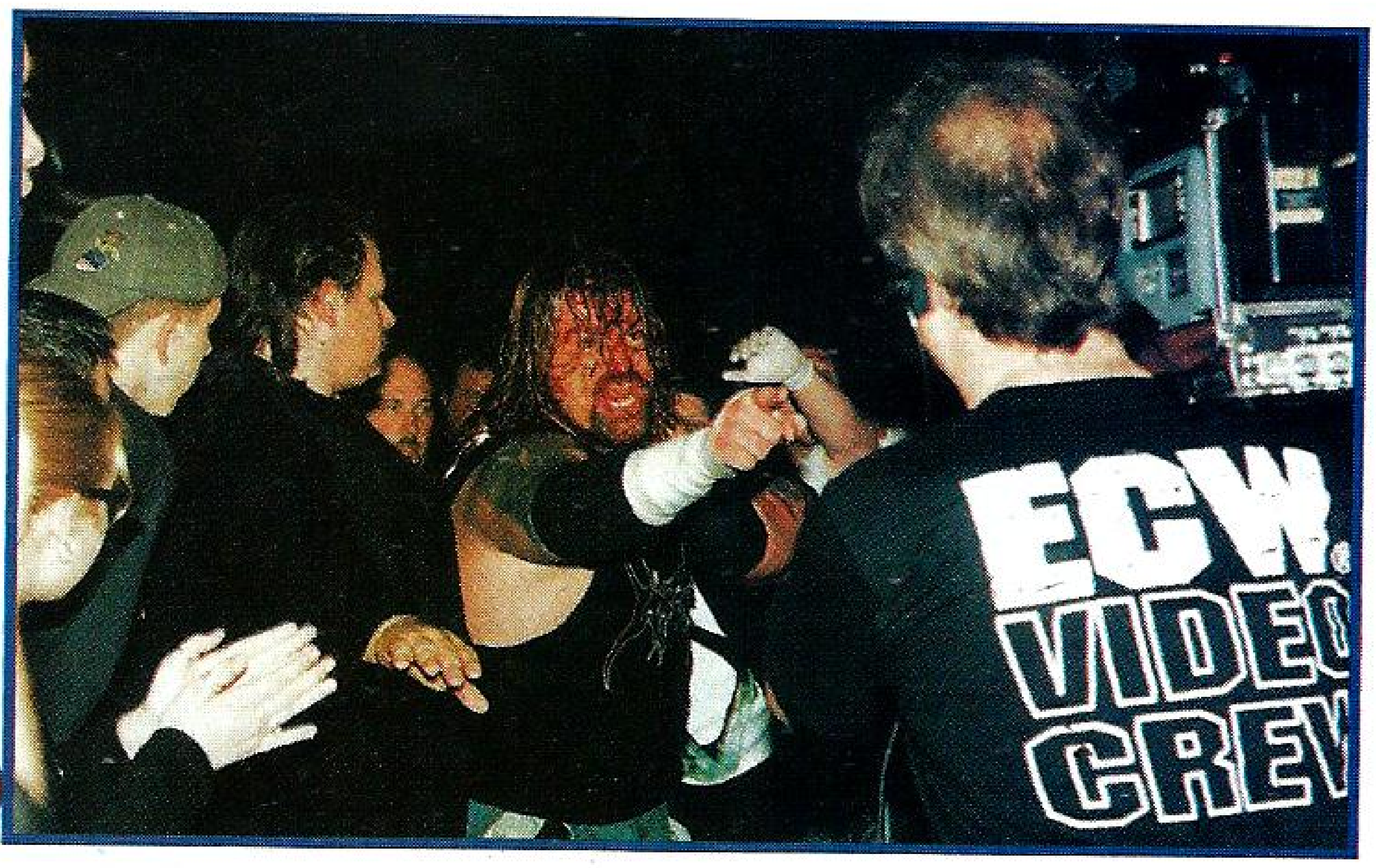
SEPTEMBER 19, 1999:
Mahoney headlines his first PPV, facing Rob Van Dam for the TV title at Anarchy Rulz. RVD wins the match.



MARCH 13, 2000:
Mahoney beats Japanese hardcore legend Kintaro Kanemura at Living Dangerously in Danbury, Connecticut.

MAY 14, 2000:
In a battle between former partners, Masato Tanaka beats Mahoney at Hardcore Heaven.

NOVEMBER 5, 2000:
Mahoney and Chilly Willy defeat Da Baldies in a flaming tables match at November To Remember.



JANUARY 7, 2001:
At ECW's final PPV, Mahoney goes out on a losing note as he and Chilly Willy fall to Johnny Swinger and Simon Diamond at Guilty As Charged.

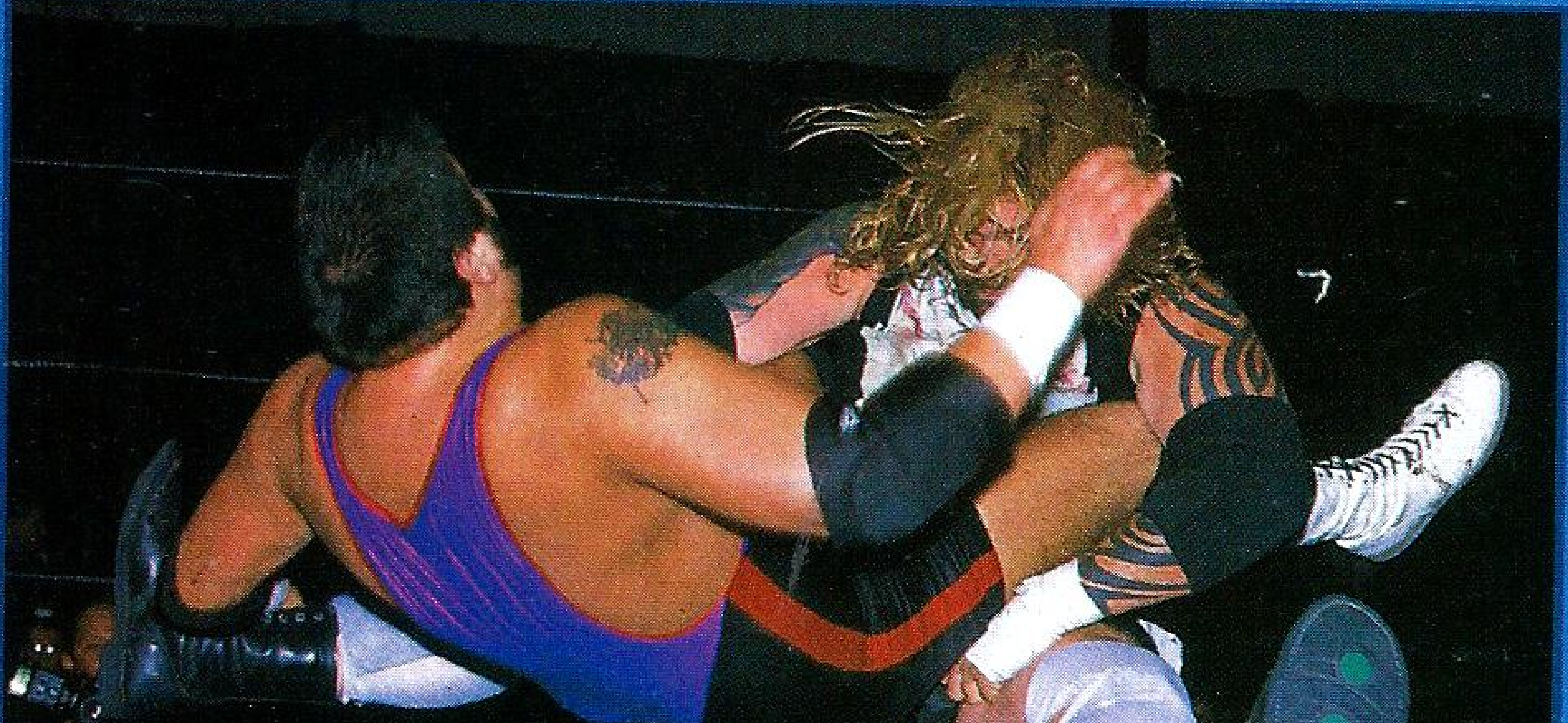
AUGUST 24, 2001:
Mahoney wins the Assault Championship Wrestling hardcore title with a win over Ron Zombie in Meridian, Connecticut.

JANUARY 11, 2002:
Mahoney wins his third USA Pro title with a win over Xavier.

DECEMBER 23, 2000:
At Holiday Hell—ECW's final house show at the New Alhambra Arena in South Philadelphia—Mahoney defeats Bill Wyles.

JUNE 3, 2001:
Mahoney regains the vacant USA Pro title by beating Cairo and Jimmy Snuka.

JANUARY 6, 2002:
How does "chairshot" translate to Japanese? Apparently pretty well as Mahoney teams with Sandman and Vic Grimes to beat Tetsuhiro Kuroda, Mr. Gannosuke, and Mammoth Sasaki on a FMW card in Tokyo, Japan.



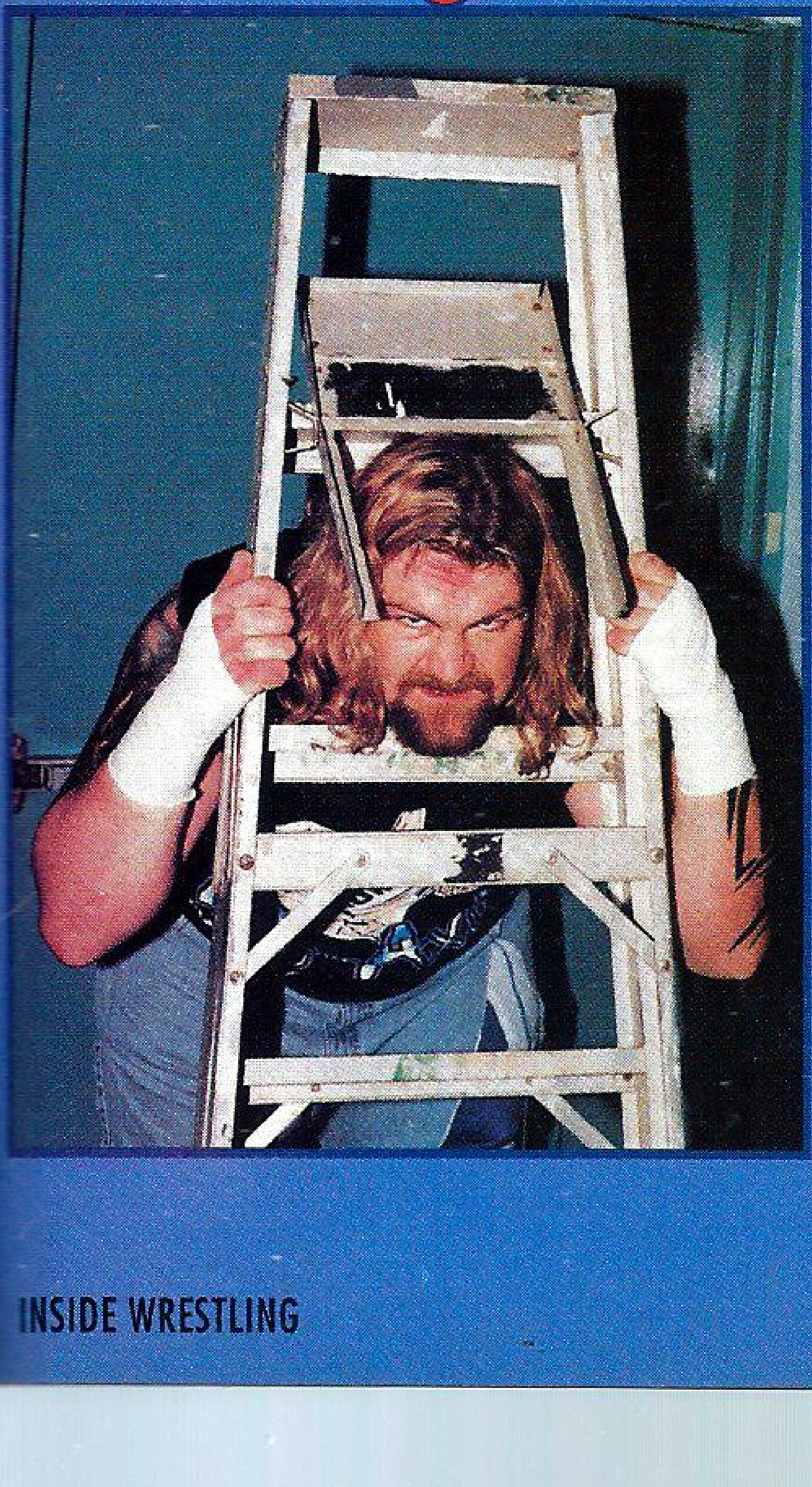
JANUARY 18, 2002:
Homicide defeats Mahoney in a match with weapons and barbed wire to retain the Jersey All-Pro heavyweight title.

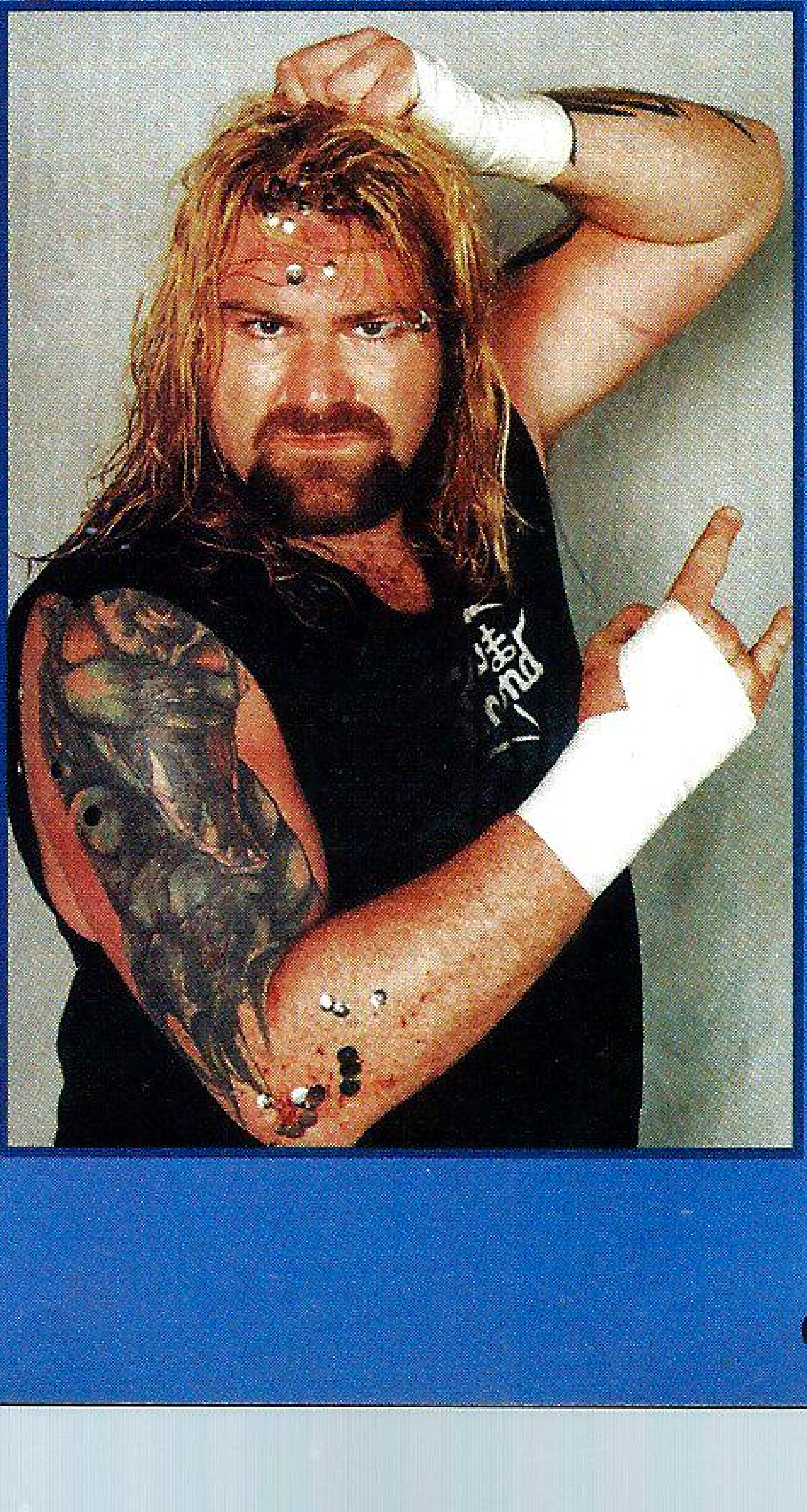
AUGUST 30, 2002:
Mahoney beats Bam Bam Bigelow to win his fourth USA Pro heavyweight title.

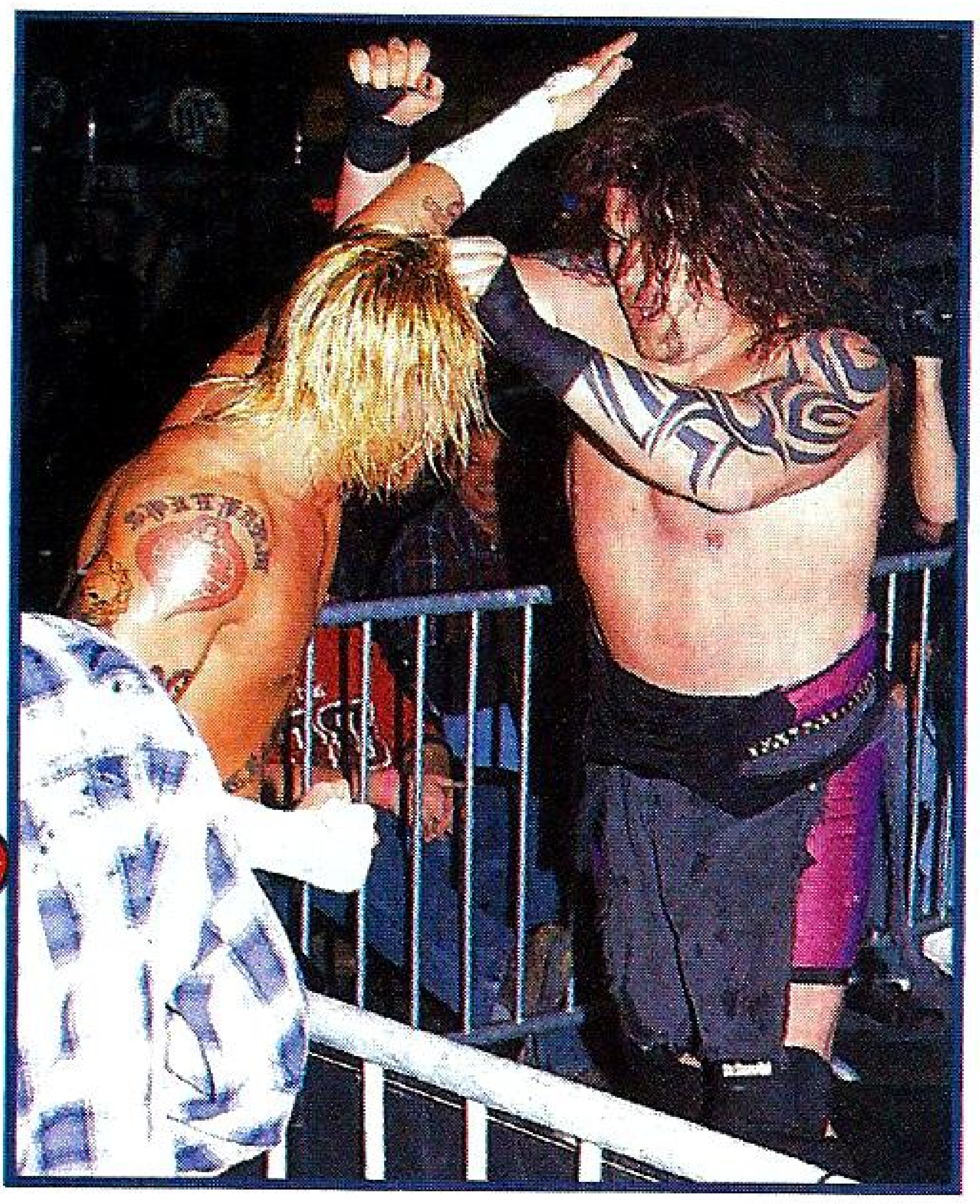
MARCH 8, 2003:
Mahoney faces Homicide three times in one night with Homicide winning a dog-collar match and a tables match before Mahoney wins a "Last Man Standing" match.

MAY 26, 2002:
Mahoney reunites with Axl Rotten at a Jersey All-Pro Wrestling show to take on Da Hit Squad in a match that featured ladders and a ring full of steel chairs.

JANUARY 17, 2003:
Anyone still doubting Mahoney's hardcore credentials is silenced as Mahoney beats Sabu to once again win the USA Pro title.







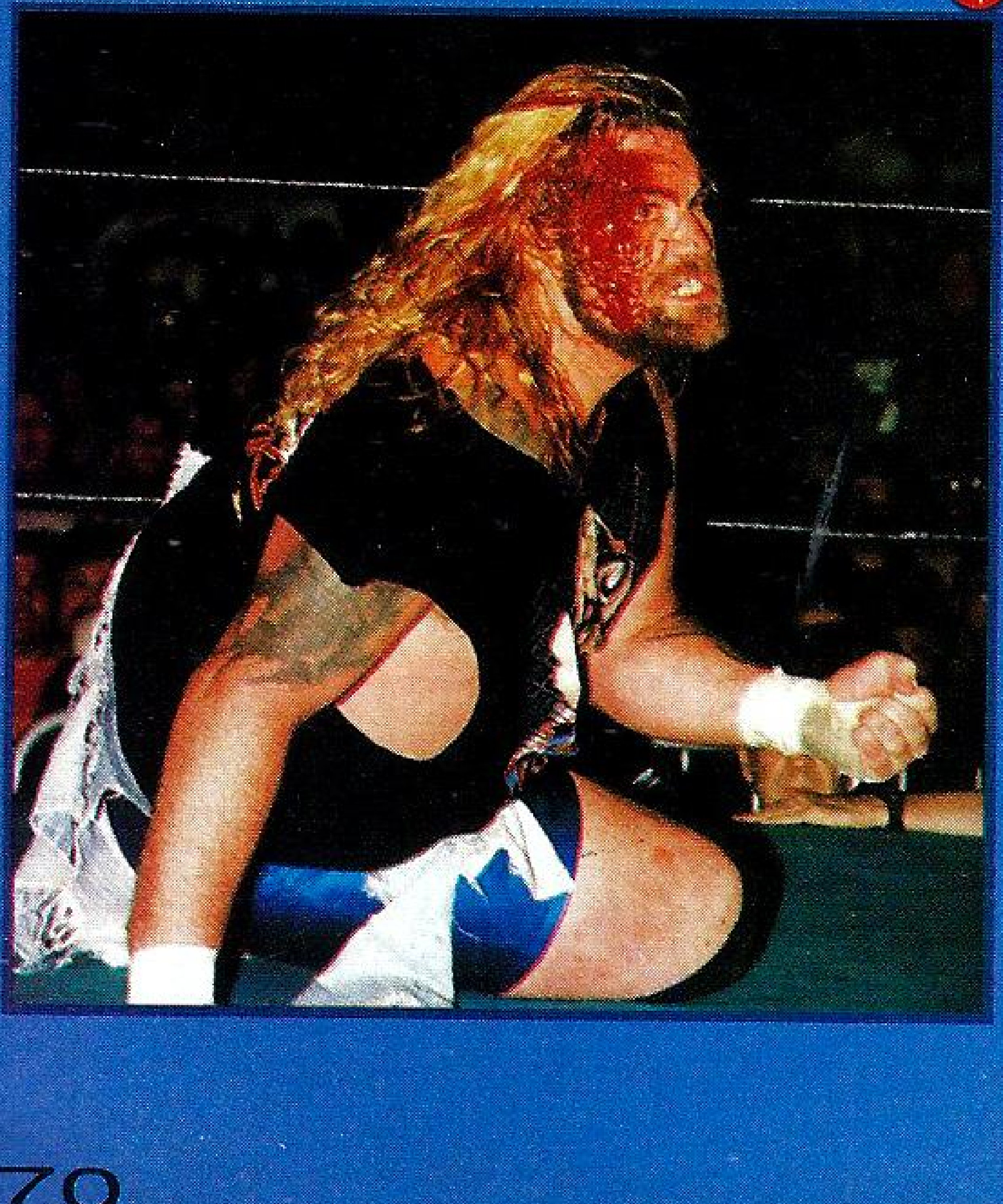
JANUARY 21, 2004:
Mahoney shows up for a cup of coffee in TNA, teaming with The Sandman in a loss to Julio Dinero and C.M. Punk.

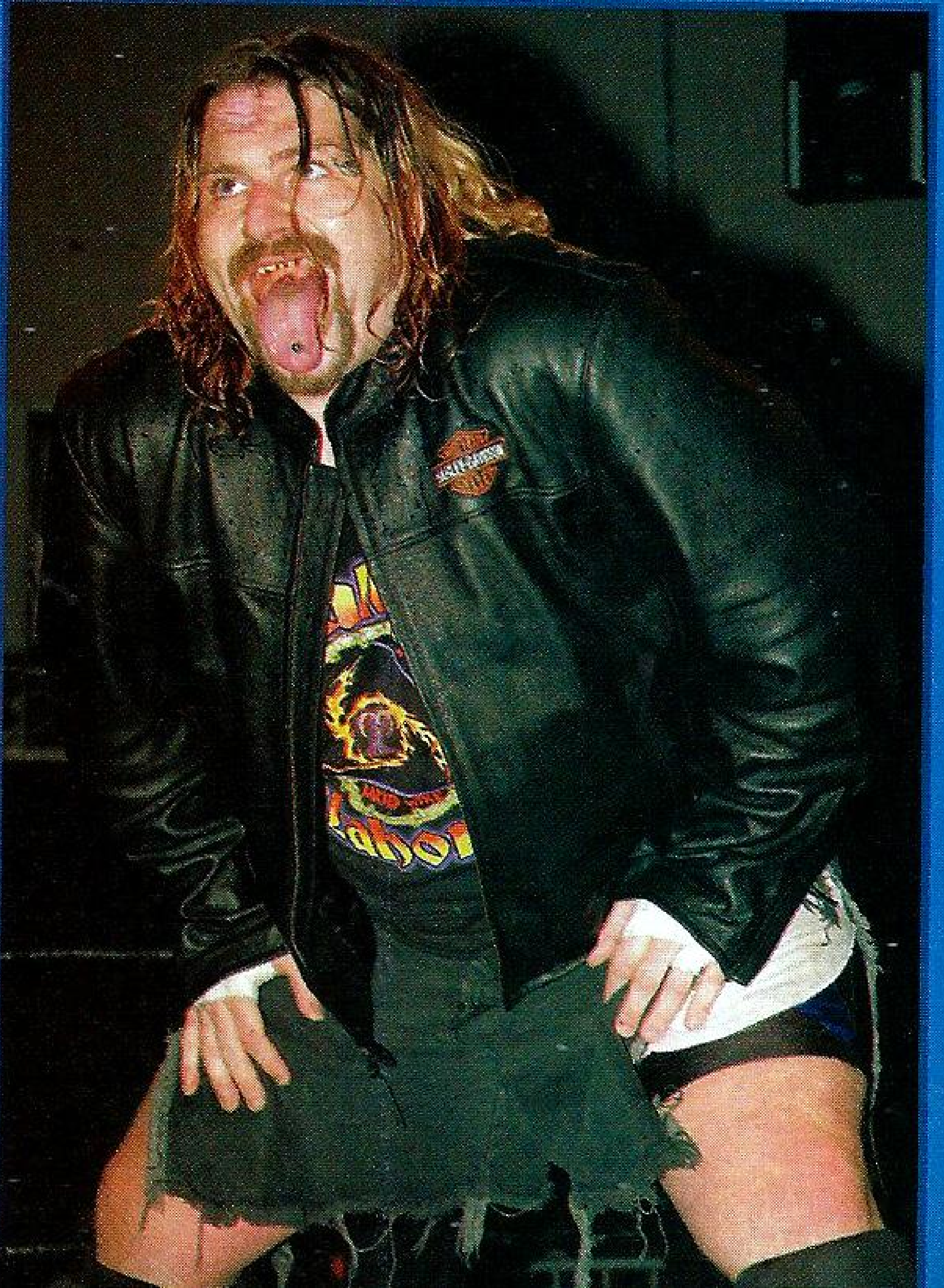
NOVEMBER 19, 2004:
Mahoney beats Al Snow for USA Pro title number five.

JANUARY 9, 2004:
Mahoney may have made for one of the unlikeliest challengers for the ROH heavyweight title, but try to tell Samoa Joe that the challenger wasn't up to the task. Joe barely retains the ROH title after a stiff match against Mahoney on a joint ROH-Jersey All-Pro card.

NOVEMBER 13, 2004:
Mahoney beats Shirley Doe to win the IWC heavyweight title.

APRIL 15, 2005:
Mahoney beats Mike Kruel for the UXW title (formerly the USA Pro heavyweight title).

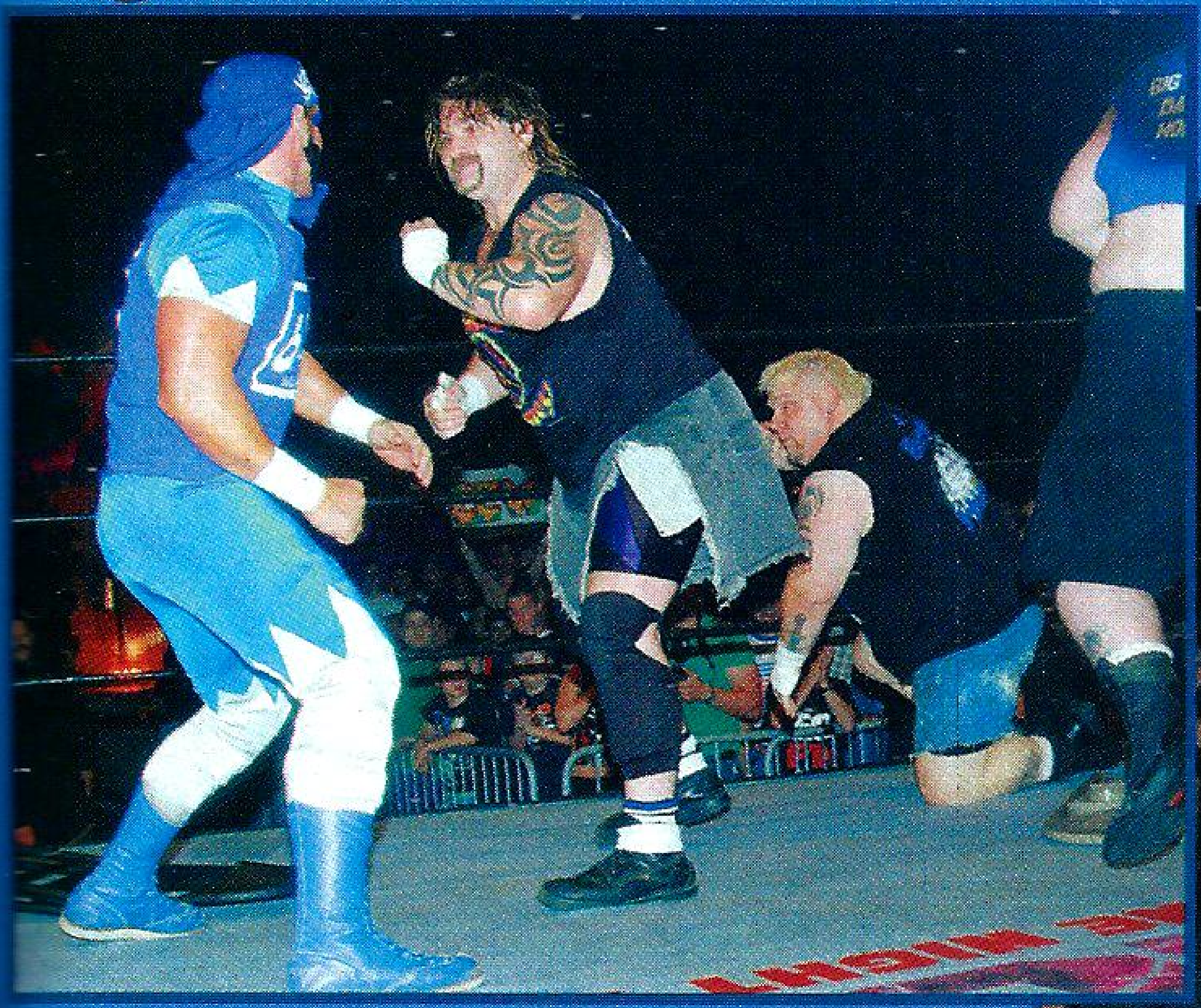




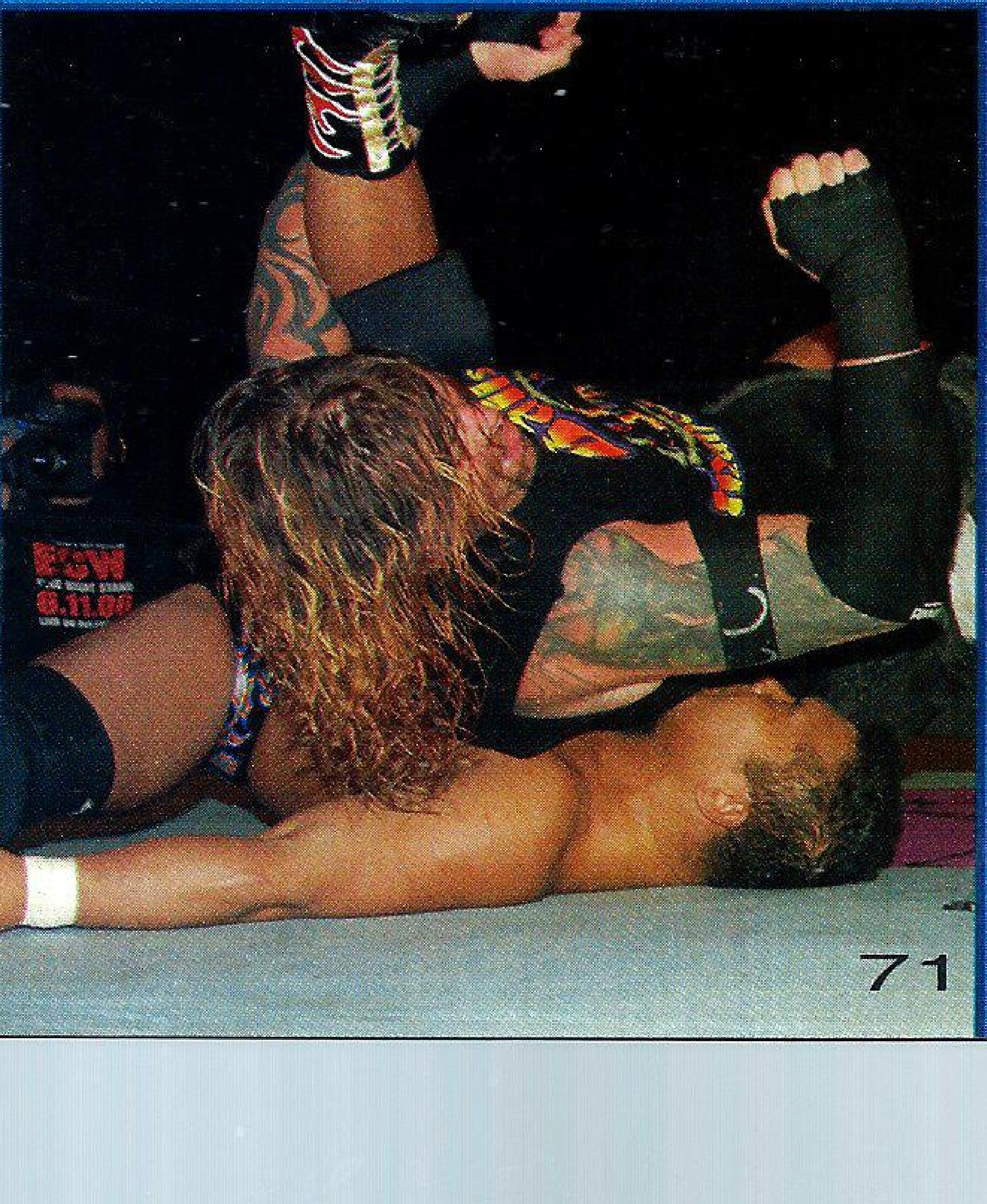
FEBRUARY 18, 2006:
Mahoney answers an open challenge by Monty Brown on a JAPW card, but ends up getting pounced for his efforts as Brown wins.

APRIL 1, 2006:
Mahoney beats Chicano and Cruz in a three-way ladder match to win the IWA-Puerto Rico hardcore title.

JUNE 12, 2005:
Mahoney and pals prevent a Blue World Order takeover at One Night Stand, as he, Kid Kash, and Axl Rotten brawl with the BWO prior to the main event.



JUNE 11, 2006:
Mahoney—now part of the new WWE produced ECW brand—defeats former tag team partner Masato Tanaka in a quick, yet brutal match, at One Night Stand II.



WOW

Check Out This SHot!

"The Game" was nearly over when Edge speared a crimson-masked Triple-H at Backlash. While Hunter would survive the spear, he would not outlast the champion. John Cena went on to defeat Edge and "The Cerebral Assassin" in a three-way match to retain the Raw World title, dropping Triple-H further into one of the longest title droughts of his entire career. After some soul-searching—and goading by Mr. McMahon—Triple-H went the way of the degenerate once again as he teamed with Shawn Michaels to reform DeGeneration X.

Photo By George Napolitano

ROLL CALL OF CHAMPIONS

FOR PERIOD ENDED JUNE 14, 2006

Championships highlighted in bold on the "Roll Call Of Champions" have changed hands since our previous issue ... The information under the championship listing indicates the date that champion won the title, who the former champion was, and where the match took place.

ALL JAPAN INTERNATIONAL TAG TEAM CHAMPIONS: JAMAL & TAIYO KEA
(January 16, 2005; beat Hiroshi Tanahashi & Yutaka Yoshie; Osaka, Japan)

ALL JAPAN JUNIOR HEAVYWEIGHT CHAMPION: SHUJI KONDO
(October 22, 2005; from Taka Michinoku; Tokyo, Japan)

ALL JAPAN TRIPLE CROWN CHAMPION: SATOSHI KOJIMA
(February 16, 2005; from Toshiaki Kawada; Tokyo, Japan)

AMERICAN WRESTLING ASSOCIATION HEAVYWEIGHT CHAMPION: TAKO OMORI
(April 1, 2006; from Shinjiro Otani; Tokyo, Japan)

BORDER CITY WRESTLING CAN-AM HEAVYWEIGHT CHAMPION: ABYSS
(September 15, 2005; beat Bobby Roode; Windsor, Ontario)

BORDER CITY WRESTLING TAG TEAM CHAMPIONS: JIMMY JACOBS & PHIL ATLAS
(July 22, 2005; from Danny Daniels & N8 Mattson; Windsor, Ontario)

EAST COAST WRESTLING ASSOCIATION HEAVYWEIGHTCHAMPION: FREAK NASTTY
(January 28, 2006; from Fred Sampson; Newark, DE)

EAST COAST WRESTLING ASSOCIATION MID-ATLANTIC CHAMPION: MIKE TOBIN
(March 4, 2006; from Japanese Pool Boy; Newark, DE)

**EAST COAST WRESTLING ASSOCIATION TAG TEAM CHAMPIONS:
ANDREW RYKER & ADEN CHAMBERS**
(May 13, 2006; from The Valedictorians; Newark, DE)

HEARTLAND WRESTLING ASSOCIATION HEAVYWEIGHT CHAMPION: JON MOXLEY
(May 9, 2006; from Pepper Parks; Cincinnati, OH)

HEARTLAND WRESTLING ASSOCIATION TAG TEAM CHAMPIONS: FOREIGN INTELLIGENCE
(February 21, 2006; from 4BJ & BK1; Cincinnati, OH)

IWA MID-SOUTH HEAVYWEIGHT CHAMPION: TRIK DAVIS
(June 3, 2006; from Darin Corbin; Plainfield, IL)

IWA MID-SOUTH LIGHT HEAVYWEIGHT CHAMPION: JOSH AMBERCROMBIE
(January 21, 2006; beat Tyler Black; Midlothian, IL)

IWF AMERICAN CHAMPION: JUSTIN CORINO
(January 21, 2006; from Shane O'Brien; West Paterson, NJ)

IWF HEAVYWEIGHT CHAMPION: KEVIN KNIGHT
(October 22, 2005; from Damian Adams; West Paterson, NJ)

IWF TAG TEAM CHAMPIONS: TONY TORRES & ANTONIO RIVERA
(April 22, 2006; from Travis Blake & Shawn Donavan; West Paterson, NJ)

IWGP HEAVYWEIGHT CHAMPION: BROCK LESNAR
(October 8, 2005; from Kazuyuki Fujita in three-way match; Tokyo, Japan)

IWGP INTERNATIONAL TAG TEAM CHAMPIONS:
MASA CHONO & HIROYOSHI TENZAN
(October 30, 2005; from Shinsuke Nakamura & Hiroshi Tanahashi; Kobe, Japan)

IWGP JUNIOR HEAVYWEIGHT CHAMPION: KOJI KANEMOTO
(May 3, 2006; from Tiger Mask IV; Fukuoka, Japan)

NATIONAL WRESTLING ALLIANCE WORLD CHAMPION: CHRISTIAN CAGE
(February 12, 2006; from Jeff Jarrett; Orlando, FL)

NATIONAL WRESTLING ALLIANCE WORLD TAG TEAM CHAMPIONS:
CHRIS HARRIS & JAMES STORM
(October 11, 2005; from Andy Douglas & Chase Stevens; Orlando, FL)

NWA SHOCKWAVE HEAVYWEIGHT CHAMPION: BOBBY ROODE
(March 22, 2006; from Josh Daniels; Deer Park, NY)

NWA SHOCKWAVE TAG TEAM CHAMPIONS: THE S.A.T.
(March 26, 2006; from All Money Is Legal; Dover, NJ)

OHIO VALLEY WRESTLING HEAVYWEIGHT CHAMPION: C.M. PUNK
(May 3, 2006; from Brent Albright; Louisville, KY)

**OHIO VALLEY WRESTLING SOUTHERN TAG TEAM CHAMPIONS:
SHAD GASPARD & THE NEIGHBORHOODIE**
(May 24, 2006; from Roadkill & Kasey James; Louisville, KY)

PRO WRESTLING GUERRILA CHAMPION: JOEY RYAN
(December 3, 2005; from Kevin Steen; Los Angeles, CA)

PRO WRESTLING GUERILLA TAG TEAM CHAMPIONS: SCOTT LOST & CHRIS BOSH
(May 20, 2006; from Super Dragon & Davey Richards; Los Angeles, CA)

PRO WRESTLING NOAH GLOBAL HONORED CROWN CHAMPION: JUN AKIYAMA
(January 22, 2006; from Akira Taue; Tokyo, Japan)

**PRO WRESTLING NOAH GLOBAL HONORED CROWN JUNIOR HEAVYWEIGHT CHAMPION:
TAKASHI SUGIURA**
(June 4, 2006; from KENTA; Tokyo, Japan)

**PRO WRESTLING NOAH GLOBAL HONORED CROWN TAG TEAM CHAMPIONS:
KENTA KOBASHI & TAMON HONDA**
(June 4, 2006; from Takeshi Morishima & Mohammed Yone; Tokyo, Japan)

RING OF HONOR CHAMPION: BRYAN DANIELSON
(September 17, 2005; from James Gibson; Lake Grove, NY)

RING OF HONOR PURE CHAMPION: NIGEL McGUINNESS
(August 27, 2005; from Samoa Joe; Williamsville, NY)

RING OF HONOR TAG TEAM CHAMPIONS:
AUSTIN ARIES & RODERICK STRONG
(December 17, 2005; from Tony Mamaluke & Sal Rinuaro; Edison, NJ)

TNA X CHAMPION: SAMOA JOE
(April 13, 2006; from Christopher Daniels; Orlando, FL)

(WWE) CRUISERWEIGHT CHAMPION: GREGORY HELMS
(January 29, 2006; from Kid Kash; Miami, FL)

**(WWE) INTERCONTINENTAL CHAMPION: SHELTON BENJAMIN
(May 15, 2006; from Rob Van Dam; Amarillo, TX)**

(WWE) SMACKDOWN WORLD CHAMPION: REY MISTERIO JR.
(April 2, 2006; from Kurt Angle in three-way match; Chicago, IL)

(WWE) RAW WORLD CHAMPION: ROB VAN DAM
(June 11, 2006; from John Cena; New York, NY)

(WWE) RAW WORLD TAG TEAM CHAMPIONS: THE SPIRIT SQUAD
(April 3, 2006; from The Big Show & Kane; Chicago, IL)

(WWE) SMACKDOWN WORLD TAG TEAM CHAMPIONS: PAUL LONDON & BRIAN KENDRICK
(May 21, 2006; from M-N-M; Phoenix, AZ)

(WWE) U.S. CHAMPION: BOBBY LASHLEY
(May 23, 2006; from John B. Layfield; Bakersfield, CA)

(WWE) WOMEN'S CHAMPION: MICKIE JAMES
(April 2, 2006; from Trish Stratus; Chicago, IL)

Mickie James

WWE women's champion

Photo by George Napolitano

WOMEN'S CHAMPION
MICKIE JAMES

Samoa Joe

TNA X division champion

Photo by Lee South/TNA Wrestling